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RANCH ROMANCES

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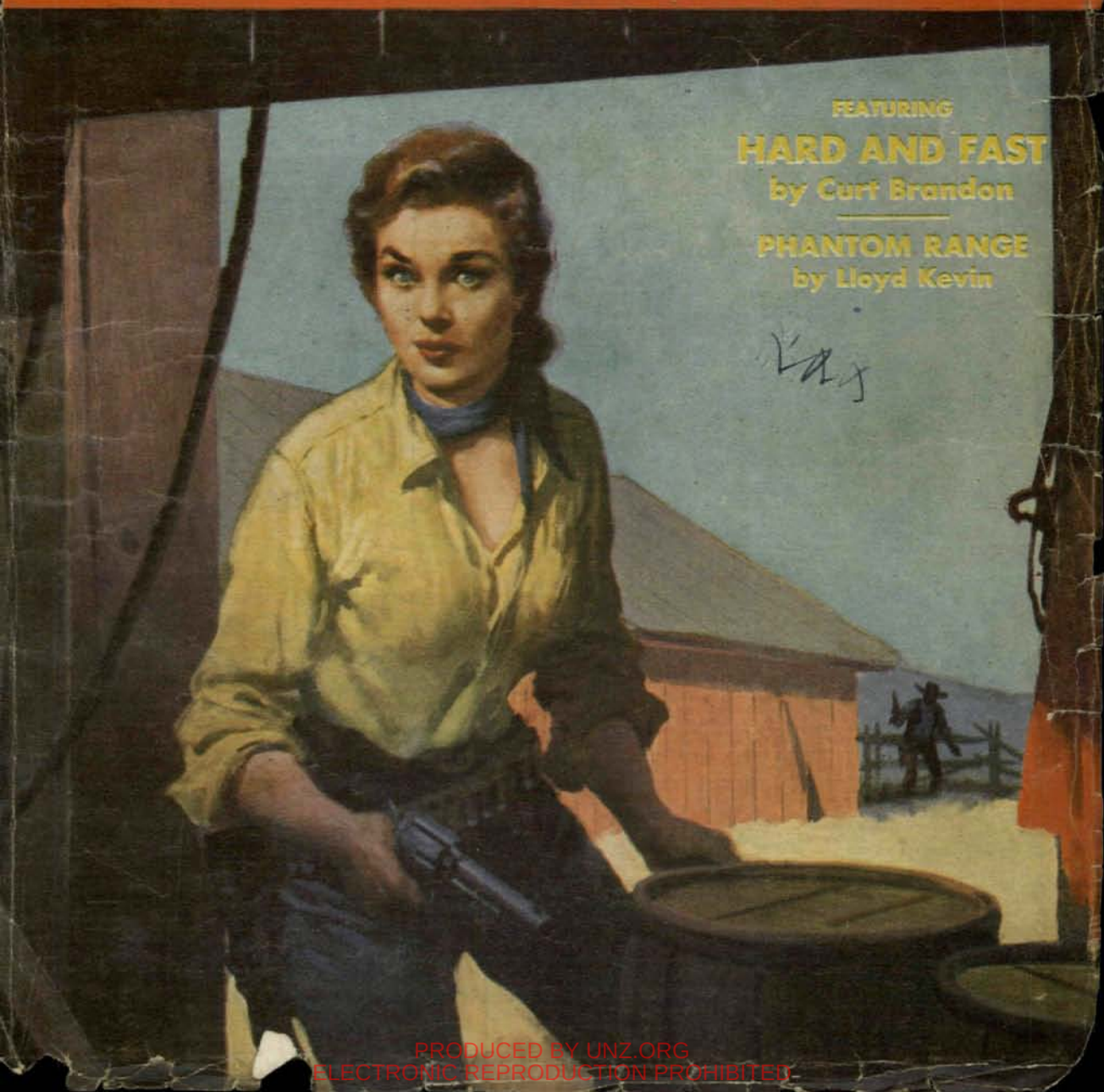

FEATURING

HARD AND FAST
by Curt Brandon

PHANTOM RANGE
by Lloyd Kevin

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Amazing New Way TO A Slimmer Figure

REDUCE WITH *DELICIOUS* KELPIDINE CANDY PLAN!

"WE GUARANTEE YOU WILL LOSE UP TO
5 POUNDS IN 5 DAYS*
10 POUNDS IN 10 DAYS*
15 POUNDS IN 15 DAYS*
25 POUNDS IN 25 DAYS*
AND KEEP IT OFF"**

*How Fast You Lose Weight Depends Upon How Quickly You Order and How Much You Are Overweight

**You Will Always Want to Keep on Eating Kelpidine Candy—and Keep on the Plan—It KEEPS Weight Off!

THIS CANDY MUST TASTE AS GOOD AS OR BETTER THAN YOUR FAVORITE CANDY OR YOUR MONEY BACK!

Now at last science has discovered a new delightfully thrilling way to take off fat—to lose up to 25 lbs. safely! The secret is that Kelpidine Candy satisfies your *craving* for high-calorie foods! It keeps you from *overeating*—the reason most doctors give for being fat! It's the best aid to will power, cuts your *craving* for foods!

NO DANGEROUS DRUGS! NO HARDSHIP DIETS!

Here is thrilling news for fat folks! You can lose up to 25 lbs. in 25 days by simply nibbling on tasty *appetite satisfying* candy, whenever you are tempted to overeat.

YOUR MONEY BACK IF YOU DON'T REDUCE TO THE WEIGHT THAT MOST BECOMES YOU!

Thousands of people were amazed to find that this delicious candy plan actually takes off weight—without dangerous drugs, starvation diet, or hard-to-follow methods. Here's one way to reduce that *you will want to* continue with to *keep off* fat! The Kelpidine Candy Plan helps you curb your appetite for fattening foods, helps keep you from overeating. Now you reach for a delicious sweet candy instead of fattening foods—it kills the overpowering urge to overeat—to eat between meal-snacks. Your craving for rich, fattening foods is satisfied with this candy plan. Almost like magic you begin to enjoy this plan for reducing.

SENSATIONAL TWO-WAY GUARANTEE!

This sweet delicious Kelpidine *Candy plan is guaranteed* (1) to take off up to 10 pounds of excess weight in 10 days. (2) to taste better or as good as your favorite *candy* and to be the best plan you ever followed or you get your money back.

SCIENTIFICALLY AND CLINICALLY TESTED!

That amazing ingredient in Kelpidine *candy* is the most remarkable discovery for fat people ever made. It's been tested by doctors in test-after-test. The results were far better than doctors ever hoped for! The results were reported in medical journals throughout the world! Doctors are invited to write for details.

HERE'S HOW TO REDUCE AND STAY SLIM!

Most people are fat because of overeating—too much high calorie fattening foods—to your amazement you will want to keep on eating this delicious candy even after you have reduced to the weight that most becomes you and you'll *keep your weight off that way!*

AMAZING DISCOVERY OF SCIENCE!

The Kelpidine Candy plan is the result of scientific research for years for a new discovery for something that will stop your craving for fattening food and also satisfy your appetite. This delicious candy does not turn into ugly fat, it gives you the same feeling of fullness you have after you have eaten a satisfying meal. It kills your desire to overeat—it kills your craving for bedtime snacks and for in-between meal *snacks. It's so safe even a child*

IT'S UNHEALTHY TO BE FAT!

Insurance companies and doctors tell everyone that too much fat shortens your life! Fat people die years sooner than people with normal weight! So be Safe! Be Fair to yourself! Start taking off ugly fat with delicious tasting Kelpidine *Candy* plan!

can take it without bad effects. With Kelpidine Candy all you taste is its deliciousness—you can't tell the difference!

KELPIDINE CANDY IS DIFFERENT!

The amazing clinical *tested* and *proven reducing substance* contained in Kelpidine Candy is prescribed by many doctors—Don't be misled by imitation products—Kelpidine Candy is the result of scientific research and is the *last word* in Reducing.

DON'T CUT OUT FOODS** CUT DOWN ON CALORIES!

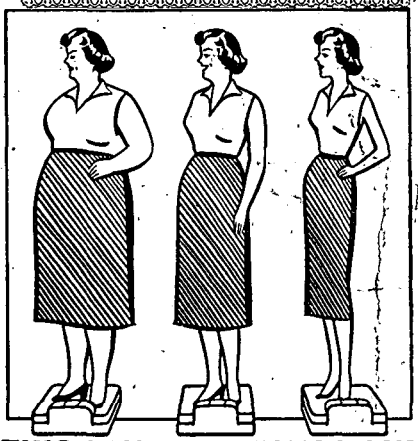
You never starve, you always feel full with Kelpidine Candy plan—You'll never suffer hunger pangs—Your desire for high calorie fattening foods is always *satisfied!* With Kelpidine Candy Plan you eat the same quantity of foods—you merely cut down on the *high calorie rich foods* with the help of Kelpidine Candy. You eat as much as you want, your calorie intake will be *less*—That's the delightful amazing thing!

YOU GET A LIBERAL SUPPLY OF CANDY!

Try the liberal supply of Kelpidine Candy Plan on our 10-day *no risk offer*. Keep a record of your weight—if you are not pleased with your loss of weight; if you can taste any difference between this candy and your favorite candy—return for refund. Just fill out coupon and mail to AMERICAN HEALTHAIDS CO. Dpt. K235, Candy Division, 318 *Market St., Newark, New Jersey.*

MONEY BACK GUARANTEE

You must be entirely satisfied with your loss of weight—This candy must taste as good as or better than your favorite candy—You must get rid of dangerous excess fat or your money will be refunded—Don't delay—You have nothing to lose but excess weight so mail coupon below now!



THIS CAN HAPPEN TO YOU!

WITH THIS DELICIOUS REDUCING CANDY PLAN!

Let this delicious candy plan help you control your desire for fattening food! Let it help you put a stop to the habit of *overeating*—A habit that's so hard to break! Kelpidine candy contains that new discovery many doctors prescribe to help curb your desire to overeat (the main cause of overweight).

$1.00 TRIAL SAMPLE SIZE!

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Candy Division,
318 Market Street, Newark, New Jersey

- ☐ I enclose $1.00, send trial sample size, postage pre-paid!
- ☐ Rush a *Liberal Supply* of Kelpidine *Candy* plan. I enclose $3.00, send postage pre-paid. (I save up to 75c postage by sending payment with order.)
- ☐ Rush a *Large Economy Supply* of Kelpidine *Candy*. I enclose $5.00, send postage pre-paid. (I save up to 90c postage by sending payment with order.)

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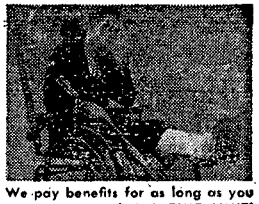

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Policy Sold Only By Mail! Good Anywhere In U.S. & Possessions! If sickness or accident puts you in a Hospital bed — you'll look back and thank your lucky stars you were wise enough to take out the "NO TIME LIMIT" Policy. It's the sensible, practical way to protect your own bank account against the onslaught of high Hospital costs. So ACT TODAY! Do it before trouble strikes.

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31st Year
OF PUBLICATION

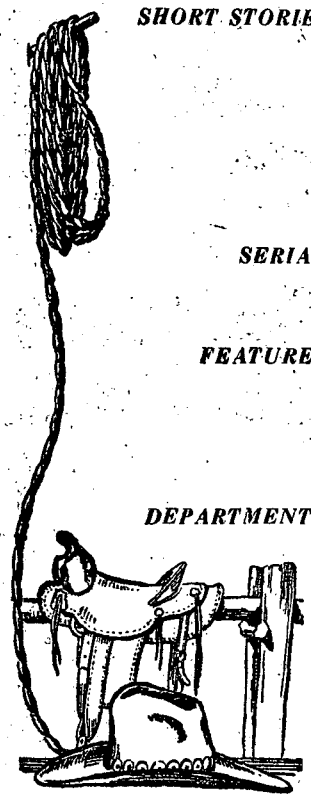
FIRST FEBRUARY NUMBER
January 28, 1955
Volume 189, No. 4

RANCH ROMANCES

CONTENTS

ON SALE EVERY OTHER FRIDAY

NOVEL	HARD AND FAST	Curt Brandon	14
NOVELETTE	PHANTOM RANGE	Lloyd Kevin	66
SHORT STORIES	THE HERDER TAKES A WIFE	Alice Axtell	56
	THE LONELY ONES	Jeanne Williams	85
	MOUNTAIN CHASE	J. L. Bouma	94
	THE TROUBLE AT THREE-MILE	Jonathan Craig	103
SERIAL	DECISION AT SUNDOWN, Part 3	Michael Carder	112
FEATURES	REASONABLE CONCLUSION, Verse	Limerick Luke	61
	NO PARITY PAYMENTS THEN, a Fact Story	Ben B. Sampselle	101
DEPARTMENTS	OUR AIR MAIL	Our Readers	6
	TRAIL DUST		9
	RANCH FLICKER TALK The Far Country Rory Calhoun	Robert Cummings	10 12
	KNOW YOUR WEST, a Quiz	Rattlesnake Robert	93
	OUT OF THE CHUTES	The Editors	109
	WHOM SHALL I MARRY?	Professor Marcus Mari	111
	THE WESTERNERS' CROSS-WORD PUZZLE		130



HELEN TONO
Editor

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J. E. SMITH has trained more men for Radio-Television than any other man. OUR 40th YEAR.

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"Am doing Radio and Television Servicing full time. Now have my own shop. I owe my success to N.R.I."—Curtis Stath, Ft. Madison, Iowa.

"Am with WCOC. NRI course can't be beat. No trouble passing 1st class Radio-phone license exam."—Jesse W. Parker, Meridian, Mississippi.

"By graduation, had paid for course, car, testing equipment. Can service toughest jobs."—E. J. Streitenberger, New Boston, Ohio.

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Keep your job while training. I start sending you special booklets the day you enroll, that show you how to fix sets. Multitester built with parts I send helps you make $10, $15 a week extra fixing sets while training. Many start their own Radio-Television business with spare time earnings.

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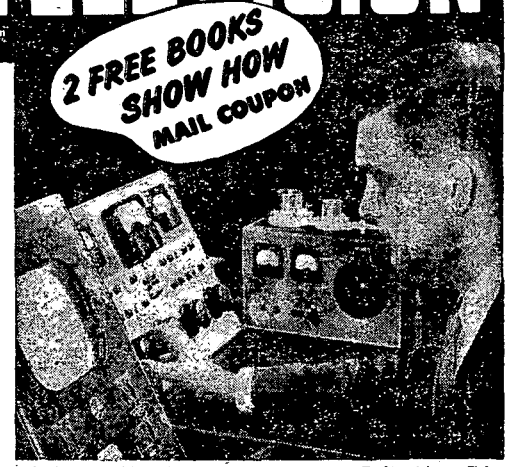
Nothing takes the place of PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE. That's why NRI training is based on LEARNING BY DOING. You use parts I furnish to build many circuits common to Radio and Television. As part of my Communications Course, you build many circuits, including low power transmitter shown at left. You put it "on the air," perform procedures required of broadcast operators. With my Servicing Course you build modern Radio, etc.; use Multitester you build to make money fixing sets in spare time while training. You can stay at home, keep your job, learn Radio-TV in spare time at low cost. Mail coupon for book showing other equipment you build and keep.

The Tested Way To Better Pay!



Television Making Good Jobs, Prosperity—Even without Television, Radio is bigger than ever. 115 million home and auto Radios are big market for servicing. 3000 broadcasting stations use operators, technicians. Government, Aviation, Police, Ship, Micro-wave Relay, Two-way Radio Communications for buses, taxis, trucks, R. R. are growing fields. Television is moving ahead fast.

About 200 Television stations are now on the air. Hundreds of others being built. Good TV jobs opening up for Technicians, Operators, etc.

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Photographer

Dear Editor:
I would like very much to get into the Air Mail column. I am 6'2" tall, weigh 148 lbs., have dark brown hair and brown eyes, and am 18 years old. My hobbies are photography and writing letters. I would like to exchange snapshots. Here's hoping to hear from someone else who is lonely too.

DAVID CUNNINGHAM

Camp Douglas
Wisconsin

Dog Lover

Dear Editor:
I have been reading RANCH ROMANCES for a long time and enjoy it. I hope you print my plea for pen pals, as I love to write and receive letters. I am a vet and live all alone with my German shepherd dog, so I am lonesome for mail. I like all outdoor sports, movies, music, traveling and meeting people. Please send snapshots. I'll answer all letters.

JOE DMOWSKI

117½ No. Edgeware Road
Los Angeles 26, Calif.

Twosome

Dear Editor:
We are just a couple of lonely girls looking for some pen pals. Evelyn is 16, stands 5'5", weighs 130 lbs., brown hair. I am 14, stand 5'5", weigh 130, dark blonde hair. We would like to hear from guys and gals between the ages of 16 to 20.

BARBARA HURSONG
EVELYN BLACKBURN

1889 Walker St.
Cincinnati 10, Ohio

Lonesome Guy

Dear Editor:
I enjoy reading RANCH ROMANCES and think your Air Mail column is wonderful. I am a lonely guy of 34. I have black hair, brown eyes, and weigh 165 lbs. My interests are sports, music, and dancing. Is there a lonely widow or unmarried girl who would correspond with me?

TOMMY BOYD

P.O. Box 511
Payette, Idaho

First Try

Dear Editor:
This is the first time I ever did anything like this—writing to the Air Mail column. I am 14, 5'6", have light brown hair and hazel eyes. Please, boys from the ages of 14 to 20, write to me. I promise to answer all letters.

SYLVIA TUMA

4921 Thipprecht
Houston, Texas

EDITOR'S NOTE: For 30 years Our Air Mail has been linking the readers of Ranch Romances. You may write directly to anyone whose letter is published, if you uphold the wholesome spirit of Ranch Romances.

Our Air Mail is intended for those who really want correspondents. Be sure to sign your own name. Address letters for publication to Our Air Mail, Ranch Romances, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y.

Shutter Bug

Dear Editor:
I'm in hopes my letter will be printed in the Air Mail column. I am a bachelor of 31, have dark brown wavy hair, brown eyes, am 6 feet tall and weigh 195 lbs. Like all outdoor sports, and my hobbies are writing letters and photography. I am also an ex-service man. I'll try to answer all letters and will exchange photos.

ANTHONEY E. FASTER

P.O. Box 516
Kellogg, Idaho

Likes Jets

Dear Editor:
Could you please squeeze me in? I am 15 years old, have gray-green eyes, wavy brown hair and am 5'7" tall. I like riding, tennis, swimming, dancing and, of course, writing. My hobby is collecting pictures and information about jets. I shall answer all letters from people of all ages, everywhere. So come on, answer my plea, won't you?

KERRY FORAN (Miss)

King George Highway,
Newcastle 11, New Brunswick, Canada

Regular Army

Dear Editor:
I hope there is a chance for a G.I. to get in your Air Mail column, because I would love to hear from girls around my own age. I am 23 years old, have brown hair and eyes, and weigh about 151 lbs. I like almost all sports but most of all hunting and fishing. I am originally from Pennsylvania, but for the past 6½ years have been in the army. Hoping to hear from you all soon.

CPL. RICHARD L. DAILY

RA 13278183
Hq. Co. PMGC 8891-TSU
Camp Gordon, Georgia

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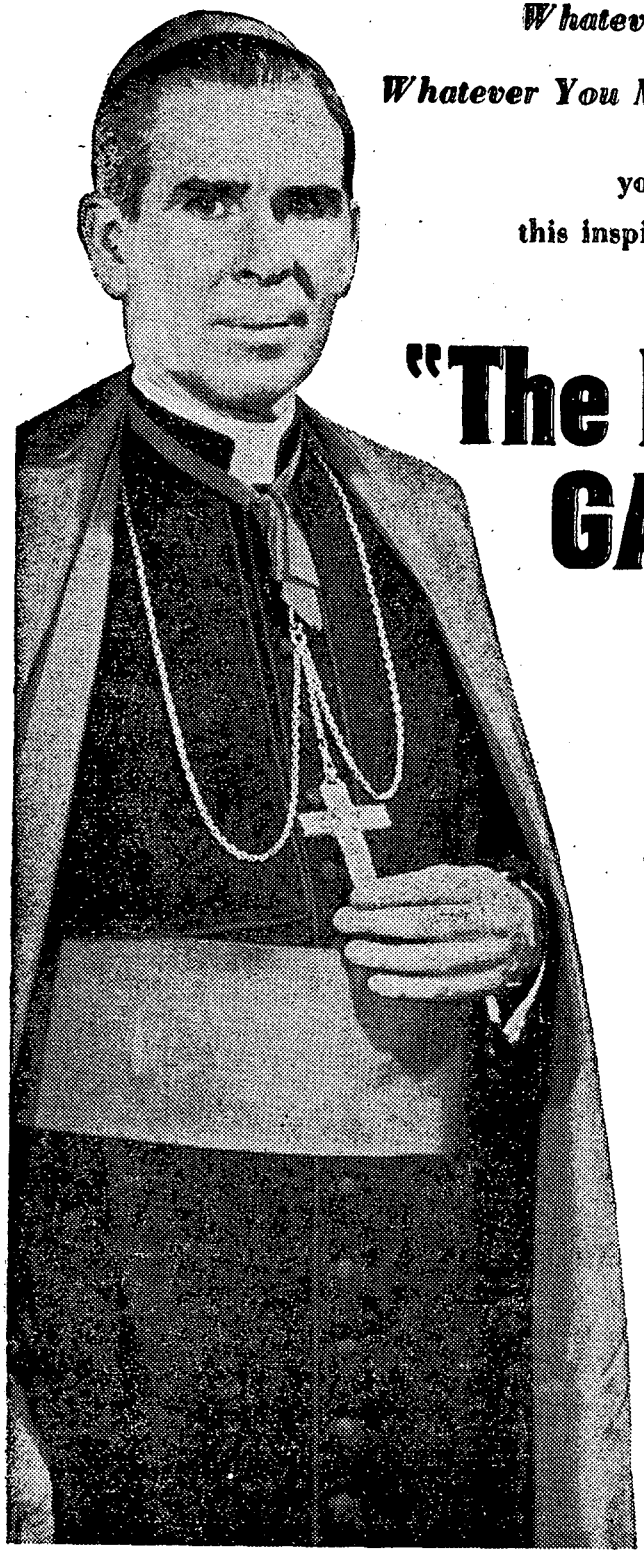

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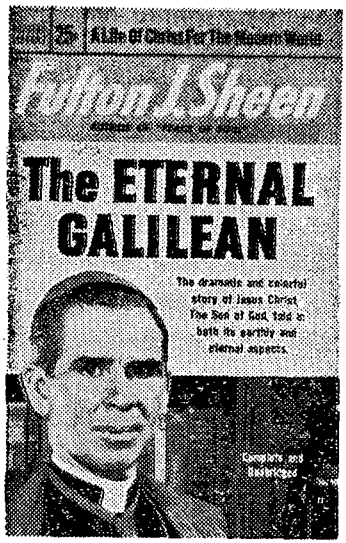

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TRAIL DUST

PARDNERS! Here's an open invitation to you to cut sign on colorful happenings of today's West. Send clippings to us, and include the name and date of the paper where you found it. We'll send you one dollar per usable item; in case of duplicates, first come, first served!

CRIME PAID for a Vallejo, Calif., man spending the night in jail on a drunk driving charge. While there he was identified as the owner of three savings bonds which he had lost eight years ago. The finder had turned the bonds over to the police.

IT WAS a bad night all round for a Dallas, Tex., homeowner. After surveying the damage done to one of his trees by a wayward car, the man went to bed, only to be awakened by the noise of another crash in which two more of his trees were knocked down.

A JEWELRY STORE operator in Nashville, Tenn., offered a sale of coffee at 49c a pound to bring in customers. They came—1,600 of them—for the coffee, but none bought any jewelry.

A POINT MUGU, Calif., chemist used the scientific approach on a rattlesnake he found outside his door. He sprayed it into a frozen state with carbon dioxide from a fire extinguisher, then carried the rattler inside and killed it.

A WOMAN DRIVER in Clovis, N. Mex., looked back to see if a flowerpot on the back seat was safe. It was—even after the driver's momentary inattention caused a crash in which she hit two other autos, then smashed into a tree.

A HOUSTON, TEX., golf course is suffering from raids by squirrels, who are making life difficult for golfers by pouncing on the balls and carrying them off into the rough.

PASADENA, CALIF., police declined to look for a motorist whose "crime" was taking a sign too literally. The driver filled his gas tank at a filling station, pointed to a sign which read: "Your Purchase Free if We Don't Wipe Your Windshield," then drove off without paying.

THAT BUZZING on a Yuba City, Calif., line turned out to be a busy signal sent in by a nest of bees in the telephone callbox.

WHEN HIS NEW telephone-equipped station wagon was stolen, a Milwaukee, Wisc., man called the thief from his home phone and complained, "You stole my car." "I know it," the thief said, and hung up.

A MIRA LOMA, Calif., dogcatcher figures he's living a dog's life—after being severely bitten by a little boy who stopped by to look at the dogs, bit the dogcatcher, and then ran off.

IN SALEM, OREG., a man just released from jail for car theft was arrested again while driving past the jail in another stolen car. His explanation: he wanted to see what the "pen" looked like from the outside.

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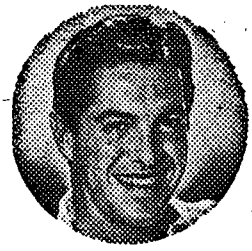
RANCH FLICKER TALK



by movie editor ROBERT CUMMINGS

This famous top-hand of stage, screen and TV corrals the best of the Westerns

The Far Country

Universal-International sends a movie company to the wilds of Alaska to catch the authentic excitement of gold-rush days

JIMMY STEWART was talking about the director with whom he has now made six movies, five of them Westerns. He expressed his enthusiasm thus: "That Tony Mann! He's crazy!"

Tony's madness consists of going out of his way to find locations which are downright dangerous for people who have to work there, but so rugged and exciting that they're worth the risk to fragile equipment and even more fragile actresses.

Jimmy thought that Mann had outdone himself when he was scouting around for the setting for *The Far Country,* soon to be released by Universal. The female stars of the picture, Ruth Roman and Corinne Calvet, agreed with him, both before and after they had been there.

They went where only real mountain climbers ever go; they stood on their feet and played dramatic scenes where mountaineers crawl along with ropes tied around them.

The scene was a glacier, the biggest one south of the Arctic, in the Columbia Ice Fields of Jasper National Park in Canada. The chosen spot was three-and-a-half miles over the ice, and though part of the trip could be made by snowmobile (a half track with skis instead of wheels in front), the last mile had to be covered on foot.

The camera and every item of electrical equipment had to be disassembled to its smallest part and carried on someone's back.

The government of Alberta provided a Swiss guide to help them find a relatively safe spot, and when the guide predicted an ice avalanche on the afternoon of the first day, Tony Mann was delighted. He made sure every one was in a protected area, and then warned the cameraman to be ready, but kept the secret from the cast.

When huge blocks of ice began breaking loose and crashing down the glacier, Ruth Roman happened to be in a close-up before the camera.

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"That was the only time in my life I ever ran away from a camera," she said later.

But Tony Mann's plan to catch her genuine expression of terror failed completely. Even though the camera was rolling when Ruth first saw and heard the avalanche, her reaction was much too mild.

"I was terrified, of course," Ruth told me, "but I just didn't show it. Later in the safety of the studio, I did the scene over again, consciously expressing the way I'd really felt. That close-up came out fine."

The scene of the story of *The Far Country* is Alaska, in the days when fortunes were made in a few months and sometimes lost in a single night. Jimmy plays a cowboy who ships a herd of cattle to Alaska so that he'll have a stake to start prospecting, and Ruth plays the owner of a gambling house, where the precious, hard-won gold dust so often ended up.

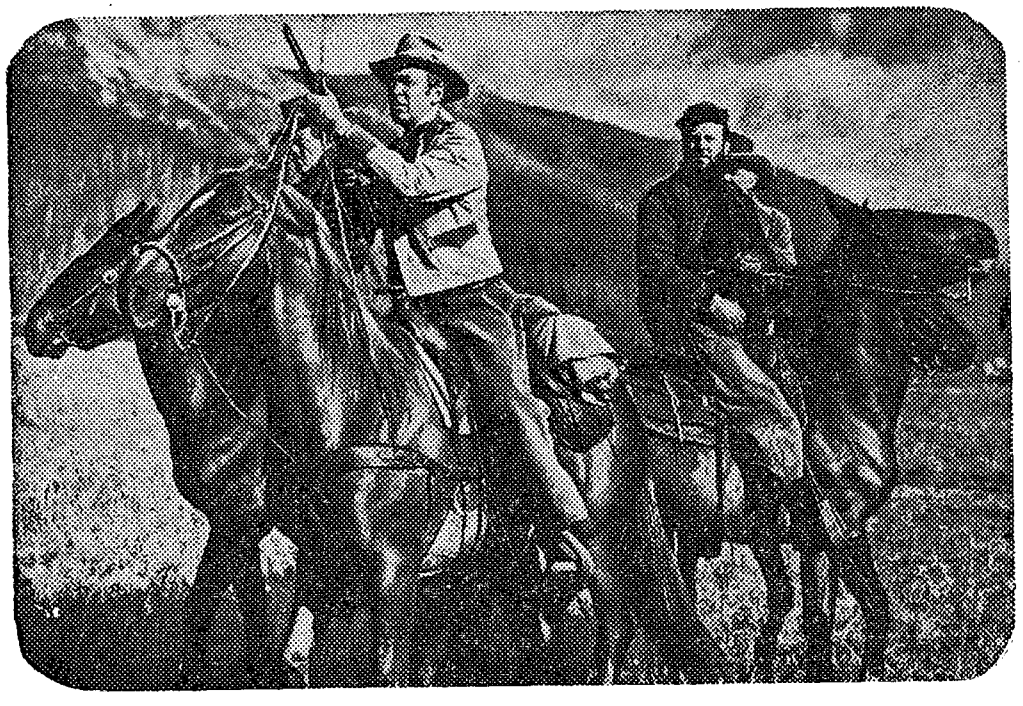
You'll have to look twice to recognize Corinne Calvet. Her curves are all hidden under men's clothing, her beautiful long hair tucked up in a stocking cap. She plays a gamin of the mining camps, such a tomboy that Jimmy hardly notices her—until the last reel.

Corinne is a gal who admits to enjoying glamor. She's never been one to hide her curves, and she's frank about liking the parts which give her a chance to display them.

"I like to be a *femme fatale,* a—what's the word—a siren," she explained to us in her husky voice with that spicy French accent. "I don't mind being a tomboy once in a while, but it would be terrible if people forgot what I really look like. Wouldn't it?"

I agreed, and so did Jimmy, who promised her the next glamorous part he had in a Western.

"Westerns are fine for other people," said Corinne dubiously, "but honestly, darling, I think I am happier on the screen with playboys and *crepes suzettes* than I am with cowboys and canned beans."



Jimmy Stewart uses a gun to protect his cattle and his gold stake

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RORY CALHOUN
He Can't Stop Acting

RANCH FLICKER TALK

ACTING, I guess, is the one profession in which nobody complains of overwork. An actor just plain can't be too busy.

Rory Calhoun told me he wants to go fishing, but he hasn't got time. He'd like to spend a few days with his wife, beautiful Lita Baron. But he's not complaining, you understand, because what keeps him from having that kind of fun is one movie right after another.

His latest is *Four Guns to the Border*, a Technicolor Western for Universal. And he started to work on it right after he finished *Dawn at Sorocco*, another Technicolor Western for the same company. Already he's started his next one.

"I never thought I'd be such a bear for work," he told me, scratching his head. But acting affected me just the way it affects everyone who tries it. It's like eating peanuts—once you start you can't stop."

We'd just been seeing the first print of *Four Guns to the Border*. I told him it was no wonder he enjoyed his work—he did it so well.

"Do you think so?" he asked dubiously. "I'm never sure." Then he grinned and added, "That's another way I've gotten to be like all other actors—I worry about whether I'm playing my parts right, and when anyone praises me I soak it up."

The reason that Rory is so surprised to find himself behaving like an actor is that he never intended to be one. It was a pure fluke meeting with Alan Ladd that got him his first part. And the only reason he tried acting was, as he says, that he tried just about everything else except office jobs.

Being a definite "don't-fence-me-in" character, Rory knew he'd never be happy behind a desk. And after being a hardrock miner, a service station attendant, a fisherman, a crane operator, a forest fire fighter, as well as a lumberjack and cowpuncher, he was wondering what to try next.

While he thought, he hired a horse and went riding in the hills, where he ran into Alan Ladd. Rory was so distinterested in the movies that Alan's name was just barely familiar. But Alan was so impressed that he introduced Rory to his wife, who is a Hollywood agent.

No one was more surprised than Rory when he got a job in the movies—and he's still surprised that he enjoyed it.

"I guess the reason I don't get restless," he said, "is because in the movies I get a chance to play different people."

He has one real beef at Hollywood. He hates to be "hammered at," and there are probably more pressure specialists here than anywhere else in the world. If Rory wants to do something, he'll do it; if he doesn't, he won't.

Rory and Lita live on a ranch 68 miles outside Hollywood, and keep a small apartment in town when the commuting gets too rough. No matter how tied up Rory gets in Hollywood, though, he'll never give up the ranch, nor stay away from it for more than a week. He keeps his horses there, and his dog (a big Doberman) and his collection of more than 30 guns.

Except for hunting and fishing, Rory's recreation is doing ranch chores. Indoors there's not much that amuses him except playing the harmonica and dancing with Lita. She teaches him all the latest steps.

"Sometimes," he told me, "when I've just gone through something pretty tricky with my big feet, I think to myself that I've sure come a long way, for a lumberjack!"

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(Universal)

Rory started acting after he'd tried just about everything else

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Hard and Fast

by CURT BRANDON

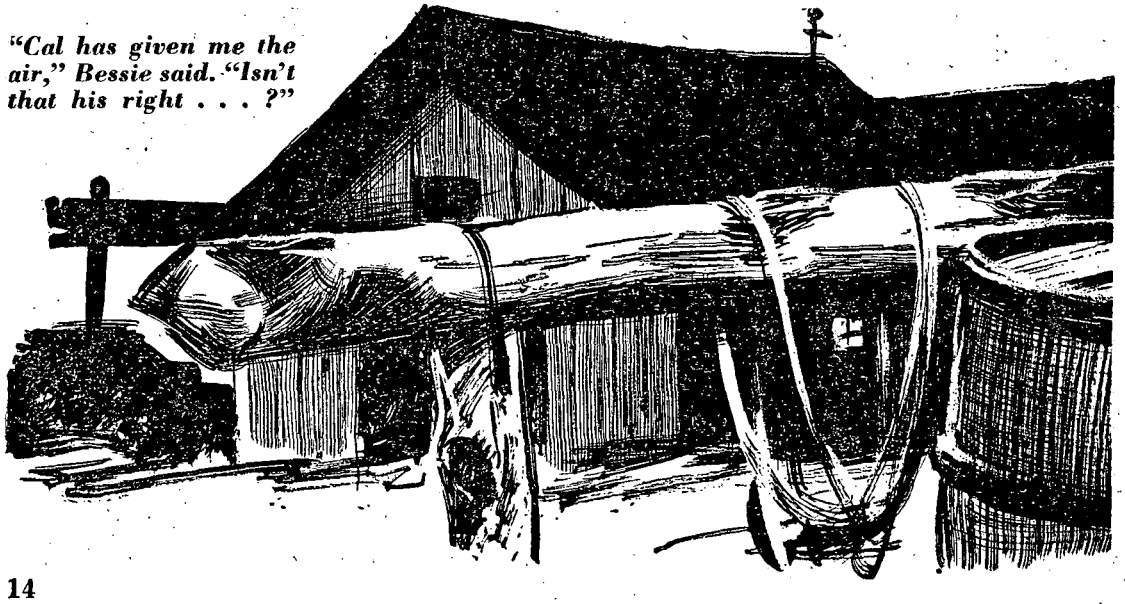
SURE I'll kill a man for a thousand dollars—if he's broken the law."

The words fell calm and deliberate from Dan Ponder's lips. He fashioned a cigarette with unshaking fingers and waited, lean and granite-faced, for the next words from Senator Roger Ellwood.

There were three of them in the office. There was Ellwood, who was still called "Senator" though he had not served in the legislature for a decade. He was an impressive man, with white hair and sharply-chiseled features. He owned the sprawling MO ranch outright and held mortgages against others. He was the big man in this West Texas country, and he looked the part.

The other man was Kelly Snyder, stocky, handsome, wearing clothes in contrast with the Senator's broadcloth and white linen, but still well-dressed.

"I hate to do it," the Senator muttered. "I've lived in this



"Cal has given me the air," Bessie said. "Isn't that his right . . . ?"

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THE SENATOR HATED to hire a gunslick like Dan Ponder, but he had to protect his ranch . . . and his daughter's honor

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country for ten years without hiring a gunslick."

Dan Ponder smiled faintly. It was all right to call him that, a gunslick. Most of his grown years had been spent as a Ranger, and both of these men knew what had driven him to that. But perhaps neither Roger Ellwood nor Kelly Snyder would let a woman's death turn them into drifters.

Neither of them wore guns, but Ellwood and Snyder were not weak men. Dan Ponder remembered that the Senator had always been considered a hard dealer. As a boy Kelly Snyder hadn't been of a grim mold. As boys Dan and Kelly had been close compadres. But some men change a lot in five years, and Kelly was one of those.

The Senator stood up in sudden decision. "I'll do it," he declared. "You're my man, Ponder. One hundred dollars a month to ride my fence. And each time you deliver me proof of guilt and the culprit's body I'll pay you a thousand dollars."

Dan nodded.

Ellwood unfolded a map of Howard County. "You remember this country, Dan. Here's Signal Mountain. Here flows Moss Creek. My fence runs from the salt flats here to halfway up the mountain. I run my best cattle there because of the water. I'm building up to Herefords, Dan, as fast as I can."

Another nod from Dan Ponder. Another faint smile. It all added up. The Senator had fenced off Moss Springs and the upper waters of Moss Creek.

"How many nesters have been depending on the spring for water?" Dan asked.

BEYOND the salt flat was a cluster of small farms. The Texas and Pacific Railroad had sold quarter-sections to immigrants, and some of the settlers doggedly clung to their holdings. When it rained they made good crops, but some summers it didn't rain. All of the time they needed water for household use. Some of them had dug wells, but the water hit was salt and brackish, not even fit for livestock.

"There are about a dozen of 'em," the Senator said grimly.

He leaned back in his chair. "I'm not trying to starve 'em out," Ellwood defended himself. "I'd buy their land just to get rid of 'em. The idea of the fence is to keep my best cattle from straying into the flats. Any squatter can get water for his household use. I won't let 'em run their cows there, but they can get water by circling this draw and hauling it in barrels."

"Quite a haul," murmured Dan, studying the map and recalling the country.

"They're acting like damned scoundrels," Ellwood snapped. "They've eaten my beef for years. I knew it and I didn't care too much. But now they're killing off my prize bulls! Instead of eating cull or wild stock, they're killing my Herefords!"

"That *is* orneriness," agreed Dan. A breeding bull, in the first place, was the toughest kind of meat.

"Damned ornery," growled the Senator. "But you should be able to stop it, Ponder. They're not going to get gay with you around. Your pay starts right now. Ride the fence every night until those squatters know the deal. Bring a man who's cut my fence and you get one thousand dollars."

"It's a deal," Dan said.

Now he turned to Kelly Snyder. There was a small thing between them which once had assumed unreasonable proportions in his mind. He would never feel the same toward Kelly again, but he did not wish to bear rancour. He wanted to be civil.

"When did you throw in with the Senator, Kelly?" he asked.

Kelly had inherited from his father the TO spread, a comparatively small outfit but enough for a livelihood. Dan had not known until this day that Snyder had become Ellwood's range manager.

"About two years ago," Kelly answered. "I still operate the TO."

"He manages his brand and both of mine," Senator Ellwood explained.

"What other brand besides the MO?" Dan asked.

"The Bar O," the Senator said. "I'm shifting to the Bar O as fast as I can breed up the stock. The Bar O will be a pure Hereford strain eventually and we'll scrap the MO."

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Dan Ponder nodded. That seemed like good business. A brand identified with blood stock brought higher prices.

He stood up. "I'll start riding tonight, Senator," he said. "I know the country all right; nobody needs to show me around."

"You should know it," said Ellwood.

"It's good country," Dan Ponder said, a little wistfully. "I'll be back here someday. If I ever raise the cash to start an outfit I'll want my land back, Senator."

The eight sections he had inherited from his father were leased to the Senator.

ELLWOOD and Snyder walked to the door with him.

"You'll never settle down, Ponder," asserted the Senator in his positive fashion.

He could have let it go at that, but that was not Ellwood's way.

"I know your breed of men," continued the man who was both the country's biggest banker and biggest cattleman. "You're the first one I ever had to hire. I don't like them around me. I respect 'em, in a small way. I respect 'em until they crack. I've seen 'em heading downhill. Their nerve cracks, over the most foolish things, in the smallest sort of fight. Then they're lower than a rattlesnake's belly. Nerve was all they ever had."

Dan felt anger at first. He almost blazed out a quick, hot retort. Then he remembered in time that this was Roger Ellwood and the Senator always flung out his thoughts as fast as they came.

They stepped outside. Pulled up, waiting for the senator, was a light buggy. In its seat was a young woman Dan at first did not recognize.

"Come say howdy to Jane, Dan," the Senator suggested.

She remembered him.

"You haven't changed much, Dan Ponder," she observed, holding out her hand and smiling.

He couldn't answer in kind. Jane Ellwood had been transformed in five years from a dark-faced girl in her early 'teens, entirely too fat and too tomboyish, into a slim lovely young woman. She was the Senator's daughter, Dan thought, holding her hand lightly for a moment. She had her father's way of looking right through a man as if, at any moment she was interested, that man's thoughts were her possessions.

"You've been a hero of mine, Dan," she told him. Her voice was different from her father's. There was a lightnesss, in her tone while the Senator was seldom anything but his direct demanding self. "How many men was it you killed in Lincoln—eight or ten?"

"One," he answered. "My gun went off accidentally."

"When you get ready to shoot up the town," asked Jane, "please let me know. Nothing ever happens around here. I don't imagine you can stand it long."

Dan studied her through half-closed eyes, observing the slight heave of her bosom under her silken shirt, the flash of her dark eyes, the proud upward curve of her mouth. He had known other bold young women in these five headlong years. He had left here, on the prairie benchland forming behind Signal Mountain, the notions he had once had about what a woman should be to a man and what a woman wanted in return. A faint smile came to his face. There were towns to the west where Dan Ponder had been known for his way with women. Perhaps, he mused, she had heard of that, too.

He turned to the Senator. Ellwood's pride in his daughter was written all over his face.

"You're a lucky man, Senator," he drawled. "You have the finest grass in this country and the prettiest daughter. When I left here she was too fat and had the worst temper in Howard County. I'm glad to see she has grown out of one of 'em, anyhow."

HE LIFTED his hat and walked toward the hotel. The buggy swept by him, the horses already at a brisk trot. Jane was still driving. She lifted her hand to him in a careless gesture. Now his smile was soft. He could be all wrong. There had been another girl who had seemed always to put out a challenge to a man, and this one hadn't meant it that way at all. You couldn't tell a bucking horse,

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mused Dan, by the way he held his head.

Big Spring had grown some in five years, but its pattern was as Dan remembered it—the courthouse square with its unpainted frame building, the two-story hotel, the stores and saloons carelessly thrown up between them. There was more order here than in the usual cattle town, for the railroad had laid out Big Spring with lavish predictions of what the town would amount to. But the lands secured from the state as a subsidy for laying track had been sold to a few men, the same few men who had held this country when it was all open range—Senator Roger Ellwood, Colonel Mark Collins, Dwight Morgan, Ben Warmouth.

Big Spring, despite its orderly inception, was no different from a hundred other cattle towns Dan Ponder had seen.

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It had a name, this hostelry: "The Commercial." But that was its only pretention. "First door on the right," the man behind the desk grunted. Dan paid two days in advance without waiting to be asked. All cowmen had to pay in advance at the Commercial. That was about the only way its surly proprietor had of getting even with the country for the lamps and window lights he had to replace every time cowhands came into town to cut loose.

There was no key, of course, but Dan carried all his valuables on his person. His worn valise contained only two extra shirts, another suit, a pair of denim trousers, his razor and several changes of socks.

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I've got precious little, he thought, to show for these last five years. I rode away with more than that.

He shaved, changed shirts, and strolled toward the saloon. It was deserted except for the small-stake poker game. Dan drank alone, watched the game a moment, then turned to leave.

The door swung open in his face and into the saloon burst a slim man in gaily-colored shirt, silk kerchief, and sleek gabardine trousers. The face above that colorful regalia was a young face, and yet wasn't. It was familiar to Dan, and yet wasn't. Ponder started on by with no more than a nod but the youngster—he was little more than that—caught his arm.

"Say, friend, aren't you Dan Ponder?"

He nodded.

The slim man grinned and stood with hands on his hips.

"Don't you remember me?"

Dan studied him a moment, then slowly shook his head.

"Don't you remember the Emorys? I'm Cal, the youngest."

PONDER looked him over again, now observing the pearl-handled guns worn low on his thighs. "There were four or five of you," he said. "I think I knew Slater best."

"Dead," Cal Emory said.

"But I should have known you were an Emory," Dan continued. "You got the look."

Cal studied him now with bright beady eyes.

"I was up at Tascosa a year after you were," said the youth. "I've been around some since you left, Ponder."

"Tascosa," murmured Dan, "was some place."

"You left a rep up there," went on Emory. He hesitated, then with a crooked little smile said, "I ran into one of your old compadres up there—Booga Red Mitchell."

"Booga Red was a pretty bad actor sometimes," said Dan. Now he was beginning to size up this youth and the drift of his talk.

"Not so bad." Emory shrugged. His eyes were still bright, still fixed on Dan's face. "He jumped on me one night," he said. "I put him in boot hill."

Something stirred within Dan Ponder, an impulse to reach out and slap the youth's face, to jerk the gun from his holster and swing it on him. You little two-bit bad man, he thought, you couldn't hold a candle to Booga Red if Red weren't drunk. A sober Red could chew you up whole.

But he held himself in restraint. For more than a year now such things hadn't moved him to quick rash action.

"Most of 'em get it that way," he said lightly.

He wanted to walk on, but Cal Emory wouldn't have it.

"You back here for good," demanded Cal, "or just passing through?"

"For a time anyhow," Dan answered. "I'm starting my own outfit."

"Me," declared young Cal in disgust, "I wouldn't have this whole blamed country as a gift. I'm just passing through."

Dan had no reply. He knew this young Emory not at all; Cal must not have been over sixteen when he left. The others, the older sons of Jerry Emory, he remembered as a rather shiftless lot. Jerry Emory had fed his family on other men's beef for years—not a rustler but a poacher, who was never molested by ranchmen because it had been their way years ago never to bother a man who killed no more beef than he and his family could eat.

Cal nodded toward the bar. "Have a drink, Ponder." There was self-importance in his tone; his voice, like his clothes, sang out for attention and respect.

Dan shook his head. "No," he said. He walked on, sensing that Cal Emory stared out of the saloon window after him.

Again there was that stirring inside. So one of Jerry Emory's boys had turned tough. It was enough to make Dan laugh, but not a pretty laugh, not at all. He had lived in a society of tough men. He had survived it. The senator said he could never turn his back upon it. And he couldn't, unless he could hold those quick surging feelings in check.

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Perspiration formed on his face and he wiped off the beads with his handkerchief. So help me, he thought, I almost swung on him. Then he would have gone for his gun. Just like that, it would have been me or him. All over nothing, for I didn't give a damn about Booga Red. It was the look on his face, the way he threw it at me. But I took it. I can take more. I can let even pip-squeaks like Cal Emory give me the grin. But what a cheap little fourflusher he is! I'd like to have seen him swagger into Tascosa when Garrett was there, or the Kid.

HE WALKED on slowly. He had the feeling under control now, but it left a sort of emptiness inside. His tall body sagged a little as he found a seat in the small hotel dining room. He looked up at the waitress without actually seeing her. He had not realized that it would come so hard.

"The chicken, fried," he said, "and java."

The girl was staring down at him.

"Don't you remember me, Mr. Ponder?" she asked hopefully.

"Yes, of course," he said instantly, forcing that other thing out of his mind. "You're Bessie."

It was Jupiter Lang's grand-daughter. Like the Senator's girl, she had grown up. But Bessie had always been a pretty little thing. The years hadn't hurt her, he observed, not in looks. But he didn't like her eyes, and her smile. There had been women like that in the society Dan Ponder had moved in. It was usually easier to spot the women than the men.

"I haven't seen you," she said, "since . . ."

Her voice fell off. Dan nodded. That was another feeling he must learn to control.

"Since Lucy died," he finished calmly. "I never thanked you for nursing Lucy, Bessie. I don't know what I would have done without you."

"I got the money you sent," she told him. "It was more than enough."

"No," he said, "I should have thanked you myself. You were a good nurse, Bessie. And it was hard on you. You weren't a day over sixteen, were you?"

"Fifteen," she said. "She died on my fifteenth birthday."

For a moment she stood there looking off, as if remembering something; then, with a small laugh, she said, "I'll put in your order and bring your coffee."

In a moment she was back. Her hands still fluttered gracefully; Dan had observed that about her five years ago.

"I hope you stay around, Mr. Ponder," she told him.

"I'll be here a spell," he said.

"Good." She handed him the sugar bowl from another table. "Granddad always said you had the stuff in you," she informed him.

She brought his dinner and Dan ate heartily of the chicken and mashed potatoes and apple pie. Bessie smiled at him from another table as he paid his check. The improvement in Dan's disposition as he sprawled out in the lobby and rolled a cigarette wasn't all because of his sated appetite.

Then he saw something which caused him suddenly to lose his taste for the cigarette. The dining room had closed and Bessie left by the side entrance. A young man met her, a slim man wearing a purple kerchief and a yellow shirt. Cal Emory!

THERE was a brooding scowl on Kelly Snyder's face as he loped his horse along the deep-rutted road. The Senator had done this thing—hiring Dan Ponder—without his advice or knowledge. Kelly had not even suspected that such a thing was in the wind.

And Dan Ponder was already in town and would be riding the Senator's fence that very night—Dan Ponder, who was some shakes with a sixgun, Dan Ponder for whom Kelly had come to feel a personal hatred.

The road to the MO headquarters circled Signal Mountain here but Kelly turned off, following a faintly-marked trail. He rode across salt flats which had kept this valley a veritable no man's land and pulled up before a one-room cabin. Few men in this country had ever seen this cabin. Kelly

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Snyder remembered that Dan Ponder knew of it. He and Dan had found it together as curious roving boys. He cursed softly.

A man stepped out of the cabin and blinked at him.

"Where's Bart?" demanded Kelly.

"Gone to town for grub."

"Which town?"

Cold Track grinned. This Snyder fellow was about as jittery a man as he'd ever teamed up with.

"Sterling City. We promised we wouldn't stick a foot in Big Spring, and we've kept our word."

Kelly Snyder had insisted on that. It was some thirty miles farther to Sterling City than to Big Spring, but he did not want his accomplices even showing their faces in the latter town. Big Spring was a small place, and the repeated appearance of two strange men would cause talk.

"You got to lay low for a few days," Kelly said. "The Senator has hired a gun slick to ride the fence."

"What's his handle?" asked Cold Track. He was a stocky man himself, with a small mustache.

"Ponder, Dan Ponder. Used to live around here. Know him?"

"*Of* him." Cold Track shrugged. He added, "There isn't anybody who rode out further west who hasn't heard of him."

"If you're afraid of him," Snyder said coldly, "I'd better get a couple of other men."

"Afraid isn't the word," Martin answered. "We'll be plumb careful, I'll tell you that. We may have to bushwhack him if he gets too nosy."

"That's all right with me," declared Snyder. He more or less felt the same way.

He turned back to his horse. "Wait three days," he said, "then pick out about eight head. We'll take it slower than usual."

"We'll lie awfully low," promised Cold Track. "We know all about Ponder."

"Good." Kelly nodded.

As he rode toward the ranch he brooded upon what Cold Track had said. Perhaps the only thing to do was to bushwhack Dan Ponder. The man was squarely in the way of Kelly Snyder's plans and, besides, there was the way Kelly had felt about Dan for a long time.

Kelly Snyder had made few mistakes in his thirty years. In a decade he had added considerably to the stake left him by his father, building up slowly while most spreads fell apart. The one mistake he had made had been an honest one. He had entirely misinterpreted Lucy Ponder's light-hearted mannerisms. He had offered Dan Ponder the only logical explanation he could think of, that he had been feeling his whisky and had acted the plumb damn fool. That excuse, and Snyder's obvious regret, had forestalled any physical action on Dan's part and had thoroughly appeased Lucy.

It could have been a little thing. Lucy had considered it so. A man had been too forward; he had presented his complete and humble apologies. But Dan Ponder had not been able to relegate the incident into insignificance. For Kelly Snyder, as Dan well knew, was never guilty of losing his head. Whatever Kelly did, or had done, was a deliberate action.

FOR two days Dan Ponder drifted over the Senator's range, as well as riding his fence at night.

He watched the branding crew in operation and the urge in him was strong to return to his old life, to know again the thrill of having his brand active. One of the men with a branding iron wouldn't have been allowed to work for Dan; he etched a Bar O on the yearling's hide, but it was a sloppy job.

A long winding wash separated the Senator's pasture from Kelly Snyder's range. The same crews worked both spreads. It was good grass, and Kelly's stock was fat. Dan observed that he, too, was breeding up to Herefords.

Back in town, he met Jane Ellwood on the street. He would have passed with no more than a greeting and a lift of his hat, but she would not have it so. She checked him with a peremptory wave of her hand.

"You're just plain unsociable, Dan Ponder," she said.

She calmly studied him. Flirtish, he

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thought, was not the word for her. She was head-on curious and had none of the shyness most young women felt or at least pretended. It was when Jane gave him that calm appraisal, that frank interest, that he softened to her. For Lucy had been like that, liking men quickly for what each was, and eventually finding one she loved.

"Just staying out of the way," he explained lightly. "You can't waste your time on an old codger like me."

"Old? Thirty?"

"That's old, Jane."

"Too old to come to the dance Saturday night?"

"I'll drop in, and dance with you if you can put up with me. But I'm no bargain. My feet don't like to work together."

"I'm case-hardened," Jane assured him. "I can put up with anything."

Dan walked on to Fisher's store. He was conscious of her eyes following him, and a faint smile came to his face. What he could not appreciate, of course, was that every young woman in the county was curious about him. Few romantic things came into their lives, even second-hand. Here was a man who had buried his young wife and had gone almost frantic in his grief. He had ridden off without as much as a go-to-hell to anybody, and for years talk had trickled back of his bold exploits. It had seemed that he wanted to be killed.

The men Dan Ponder had known clucked sympathetic tongues and allowed it was a shame that he had cracked up. But the women, particularly the young ones, felt a different way. It was "sweet," something to cry over, this hell-for-leather stampede by a man searching for a man's death. The men in their lives prided themselves upon a minimum of emotion, and woman in their hands and their country quickly learned that all the tenderness they would know came in a few rushing months before reality set in.

Ponder turned to throw away his cigarette butt before entering Fisher's. What he saw down the street brought an amused gleam to his eyes.

Cal Emory, in a different garb but still gaudily resplendent, walked up to Jane Ellwood and spoke boldly. Fifty yards away Dan could see the rush of color into her face. Then he saw her lips move in cold retort and she swept by the self-styled bad man without a backward look. Dan grinned appreciatively. The girl had fire, no doubt about that.

COLD TRACK and Bart kept their word; they were careful. Theirs was not such a dangerous assignment; in cahoots with them and Kelly Snyder was a Bar O ramrod.

He was the same man whose careless branding had earned Dan's disgust. Actually Ben Simpson could use a branding iron as well as any man. But a carelessly sketched Bar O could be readily altered into a Bar T.

That was Kelly Snyder's brand.

The yearlings thus branded were usually driven in late afternoon toward the wash which separated the two ranges. Thus it was relatively simple for Cold Track and Bart to work them across the draw and onto Kelly's grass. If in the darkness they drove across several head whose brand could not be so easily altered, it was all right. Yearlings drifted. Kelly's men drove them back across the wash. Just a neighborly courtesy.

For two years Kelly Snyder had played his double game. The Herefords that Senator Ellwood was continuously buying to breed up his stock cost money. Kelly bought some also. But Kelly's stock was improving faster than the Senator's.

For a time Kelly had intended only to supplement his own blooded stock at the Senator's expense. But of late he had decided on a more ambitious course. Ellwood was strained financially. He was a man with far-flung interests, and not all of them were paying off. A year of low cattle prices or a bad drouth would see cattlemen going under who were heavily in debt to the Senator. If they defaulted all at once then the Senator was gone, too.

If Kelly Snyder played his cards exactly right he would be the only man able to finance the Ellwood range. He meant to get it.

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For a time he had counted upon acquiring it in another manner, but Jane Ellwood had not taken him seriously as a suitor. Jane had showed him a formal politeness, but nothing more. She did not even conceal that she didn't particularly like him.

Cold Track and Bart nipped the Senator's fence with their pliers and drove six yearlings across the wash. They left the fence down. At first Kelly had believed in replacing the fence, but now his after-dark crew not only cut it but destroyed whole segments. The Senator was spending money for barbed wire every week.

The two outlaws were skilled at their trade. Cold Track had been in the state penitentiary when Kelly Snyder found him. Quite by accident Kelly had found a letter addressed to the Senator from Cold Track's brother, asking the Senator to recommend a pardon.

Using the Senator's name and stationery, Snyder had wangled his release. Cold Track's raids by darkness was the price he set.

DAN PONDER could not be everywhere on the fence at once. The outlaws kept a careful watch on him. One man kept a rifle ready in case Dan stumbled upon them.

Dan discovered the slashed fence just before daylight, not many minutes before his watch would be terminated.

He examined all tracks, saw that the two men had done the cutting, that then one had stood his horse as if on lookout. He could not see that any cattle had been driven off. Several yearlings had strayed through the fence and across the wash. But he reported to the Senator that the vandals had apparently not been interested in rustling the Bar O stock.

"Damn their souls," growled the Senator. "I hate an ornery man, Dan."

"Sooner or later," Dan mused, "I'll run across them. I'm not riding a set beat. I'm doubling back a lot. My horse is pretty gentle. I'll let him go on ahead and I'll double back on foot."

"Do that," snapped Ellwood. "I want them killed."

Dan Ponder walked out of the bank, and the Senator studied the ranch records with a worried frown. Dan had told him exactly what Kelly had reported more than once. The fence was cut, some cattle had wandered, but nothing was stolen.

For a time the Senator had had his suspicions, but he had personally checked the results of these raids. Every roundup found some of his cattle among Kelly's stock. But the same cowboys worked both spread; the yearlings with Bar O brands were driven to the railroad and sold and the receipts credited to the Senator. Yet he was losing steadily. His Hereford strain was not increasing. He might have believed it the fault of the strain, but he knew better. Kelly's Hereford stock was increasing. So was Dwight Morgan's.

Dan Ponder, as puzzled as the Senator, kept an even closer vigil. He doubled back often, sent his horse trotting ahead while he moved afoot. Also he spent some daylight hours sitting high on Signal Mountain, studying the country to the south, looking for a tell-tale wisp of smoke that would locate any camp.

He found their tracks, but no trail could be followed across the salt flats.

For two nights he heard no sound nor learned anything for his watch on the mountain top. Then, early in the evening, less than an hour after he had taken up his vigil, he heard a lone horse in the distance, coming from the north. When the noise of hoof prints stopped abruptly, Dan was sure he had found his man. Evidently the fence cutter was working alone this night.

He rode cautiously in the direction of the last sound, stopping every now and then to listen again. His man was upwind; the smell of tobacco drifted down to Dan. He tethered his horse and went forward on foot. His boots scraped on pebbles; he took them off and continued barefooted.

Then he saw his man, and heard him at the same time. He was sitting atop a huge boulder, whistling faintly, smoking a cigarette. His horse was feeding in a nearby patch of grass.

Dan had to circle to get between this man and the moonlight. Then he could

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venture closer, hidden by patches of shadows.

Suddenly he stood in such a position that the moonlight was squarely on the man's face. Dan grunted. He had not expected this, but neither was he too startled.

The man was Cal Emory.

ONE cigarette used, Emory made another and lighted it. Dan waited, wondering what his next step should be.

Then he heard another rider approaching and slid into more secure cover. This rock, known over the country because of the stone ovens beneath it, was a perfect meeting place for two men who operated together by night.

The rider came on at a gallop for another moment and then, near to the rock, slowed up. Cal Emory dismounted from the boulder and stood waiting at his foot.

Now Dan was startled. The rider came into the clearing and Ponder recognized Jane Ellwood.

She pulled up her horse and sat looking down at Cal Emory.

"Well?" she asked after a moment.

Her voice was faint from where Dan crouched. He could not hear Emory's reply. He saw Cal help her from the saddle and attempt to let his arm stay around her. Jane pushed it off. Dan could not make out her words, but her tone showed resentment.

Dan wished he were out of earshot. Obviously Jane Ellwood had come willingly to this tryst with Cal Emory. Dan was both disturbed and amused about that—amused as he tried to picture the Senator's face if Ellwood were watching from the shadows, disturbed because it was plain that Jane Ellwood was taking a risk just for the thrill of it.

They talked together a moment longer. From their gestures Dan guessed that Cal was trying to persuade her to sit down and she was refusing.

Then Emory caught her in his arms. She struggled; Dan heard a small cry from her. The fight she was putting up was a strong one.

Dan had been sitting on his haunches. He came slowly to his feet. He would go to her aid, of course, but he did not intend to hurry. Let her fight a little longer, he decided. Let her realize that a man is stronger, even a no-good like Carl Emory.

Emory imprisoned both her hands and kissed her. Dan watched quietly, observing that Jane no longer resisted.

Then Cal freed her and stepped back. She stood there, bosom heaving, silent.

Then without a word she turned to her horse. Cal caught her hand. She made no motion to thrust him off.

He seemed to be urging her to sit down again. Her voice floated over to Dan.

"No," she said.

Emory did not seize her again. Instead Cal, shrugging his shoulders, released her and held her horse while she mounted. She sat in the saddle a moment and talked with him.

The little fool, Dan thought. She isn't even mad that he manhandled her.

Cal brought up his own horse.

"I'll ride back with you as far as the road," Dan heard him say.

Darkness swallowed them up. Dan went slowly back to where he had tethered his horse. How long has that been going on, he wondered? And had the Senator's daughter lost her sanity? What was it about a swaggering little self-styled bad man that made women go for him? Bessie's reason for admiring Cal made more sense than any motive Jane Ellwood might have. Was it a challenge Cal Emory threw at them? Emory did that to a man, particularly a man who had used guns himself. But a man had to think about cowardice and his own self-respect. What was a woman thinking about?

He pulled his boots back on and made a smoke. What purpose did Cal Emory have with the Senator's daughter? If Cal thought he could play with her, then throw her off, he did not know this country, nor the Senator. The Senator could even hire my gun for a job like that, Dan mused.

Was Emory trying to marry her? Did the young fool think for a moment that the Senator would accept him as a son-in-law and permit the Bar M to fall eventually into

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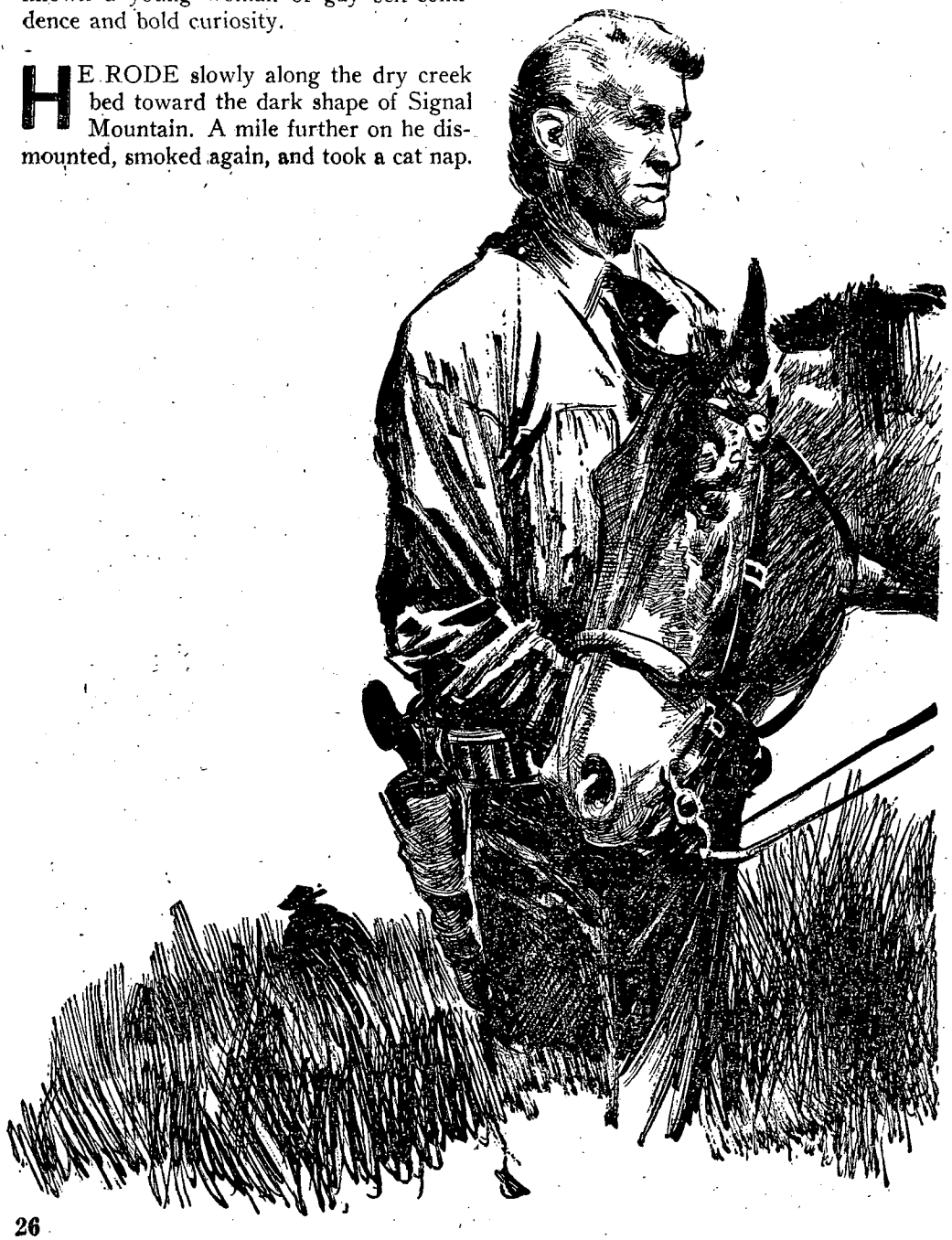
his hands? Dan mused a while longer and then gave up. He had not figured out many things about Cal Emory. He was closer to understanding Jane Ellwood, but then Dan had an advantage over most of the other young men in this country who had despaired of ever figuring Jane out. He had known a young woman of gay self-confidence and bold curiosity.

HE RODE slowly along the dry creek bed toward the dark shape of Signal Mountain. A mile further on he dismounted, smoked again, and took a cat nap. For several nights now there had been no suspicious sounds in the dark. Had he and the Senator just suffered a casual raid by a footloose hombre who needed a stake to move on?

Then he heard horses further up the flat. Two of them, he decided. He mounted



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Shrugging, Cal released her and held her horse while she mounted

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again, but did not gallop headlong in the direction of the night raiders. He sat there listening a few moments.

The sounds were unmistakable. One man was moving through the brush, and now there were the noises of cattle scuffling along to complete the picture.

Dan thought a moment, then turned his horse and rode toward Signal Mountain, leaving Cold Track Martin and Bart to drive thieir cattle without disturbance.

Dan could run them off, of course. He could barge up with his guns popping, and the two night riders would abandon their stolen cattle. But that would not satisfy Dan. In the first place there would be the risk to himself; he did not relish a running gun battle in the dark of the flats. Second, he wanted to follow this trail to the end.

He gained the mountain without being intercepted, without even being heard. This was a hillside of almost solid rock, shaped as much like a barrel as anything else. The Indians had used it as a signal ground; the old-timers recalled that signal fires from this height could be seen thirty miles away on a clear day.

The moonlight came and went with puffs of clouds, but Dan finally saw the two riders moving below him. They drove no cattle ahead of them; evidently they had slashed the Senator's fence just for meanness. Dan watched them a few moments, guessing at their destination. Then he went down the back side of the mountain at a gallop and raced across the open country. Twice he stopped to rest his horse, once at Moss Creek. But in three hours he had reached the second fringe of hills, the beginnings of the salt lick country.

He took another quick nap and was awake shortly before dawn. It was a full ten miles from Signal Mountain to this stretch of hills, which was the caprock that extended from the Rocky Mountains into South Texas, sharply dividing one kind of land from another, the barrier between plain and broken region. Here was the beginning of the only cover men could find.

With daylight he took a high station and waited patiently. The sun came up, and still there was no evidence of horsemen moving in his direction. Hunger and thirst began to gnaw at him. Lack of water had kept this range vacant ever since Dan could remember, and there had been virtually no travel in this direction until the railroad had laid down its ribbon of steel. The closest water was back at the big spring itself, with a gap of some forty miles to the next westward water hole. Then he saw a swirl of dust a long way off, to the south. He mounted and rode slowly along the high country, keeping the caprock between himself and the plain below. Soon he saw the two men, riding deliberately back to their hideout, sure that they had not been followed.

Dan watched until he could be sure of the pass they would select, then spurred his tired horse into another gallop. He reached the pass, a mile-long stretch between two low but sharp hills, rode down it a half-mile, then mounted one of the sides and carefully selected his ambush.

THERE were many details to consider. The sun must be behind him when the two horsemen had penetrated the pass this far. The shadows created by the hilltop above him must shelter him from a retaliating fire. And he wanted both the night riders within his vision at the same time.

Dan Ponder waited calmly, moving his rifle into position, holding a close bead on the nearest rider. That was Bart, but from two hundred yards away Dan recognized neither man. Both rode with kerchiefs up against the dust and hats pulled low against the sun.

Dan raised up to one knee and took careful aim. The sharp sound of his Winchester was flung back by the far bluff into his face. Swiftly he pumped more lead, at the same man, then at the other.

There was no answering gunfire. Bart Wilson was hit by the first shot. The bullet tore into his shoulder a full second before either he or Cold Track heard the rifle's crack.

Bart wavered from the impact. Cold Track knew immediately that they had ridden into an ambush. He dropped out of

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the saddle, screening himself with his horse. His rifle was in his hand, but he did not throw a bullet at Ponder. He could place the ambush and considered it too far to waste lead.

Bart gripped the saddle horn to keep from falling.

"Got me in the shoulder," he moaned to Cold Track.

"Hang on," Martin said. He darted from the shelter of his horse to the screen of Bart's mare. He held his accomplice in the saddle. One of Dan's shots kicked up dust beside him.

Holding both brides, Cold Track started at a trot for the mouth of the pass. He was sure that his unseen assailant would not reveal himself in an open pursuit even when they were in full flight. After seventy or eighty paces Martin stopped, figuring they were now out of rifle range.

Bart's face was pale. "I got it pretty hard," said the wounded man.

Martin considered their plight. He saw a man dart to cover closer to them. Now he fired his first shot, not with any hope of hitting but to discourage Dan from coming any closer for the time being.

"We got to ride," Cold Track said grimly. "Bend over and rest your weight on your horse's neck.

Bart tried to obey. "We'll never make it this way," he groaned. "Go on, Cold Track, while you can."

"We'll make it," Martin said. Bart lay on his horse's neck; Cold Track slipped a rope around the animal's belly and around his accomplice. He made both ends of the rope fast to the saddle horn. Then he mounted and, holding Bart's bridle, began to retreat.

Looking back over his shoulder, Cold Track sighted Dan. He turned immediately and tried to drop him. As he had expected, his shot was far too short. But the most he could hope for was to hold Dan out of rifle range.

They had filled their canteens at Moss Creek, including an extra one which neither had touched. That full canteen decided Martin's route. He touched spurs to his horse as they came out of the pass and, pulling Bart's mount behind, dipped westward.

In this direction there was nothing but open country for miles. Dan Ponder would have no chance of another ambush. There was no water, not for another several hours' ride, and Cold Track meant to turn this to his advantage.

"It's going to be a helluva trail," he grunted to Bart. "If that hombre follows us all the way, he's going to get plenty thirsty."

As soon as he was out in the flat country Cold Track pulled up and helped Bart from the saddle. It was a painful wound indeed and Wilson had already lost much blood. Martin made a crude but effective bandage of his own shirt. Dan came in sight behind them, but it was not necessary for Cold Track to throw another warning shot. Ponder had no intention of riding into rifle range.

Martin helped the wounded man back into the saddle, tied him again. The two renewed their flight.

COLD TRACK was in no hurry. Their horses were tired and were no good for a run. There was no prospect of forage or water ahead for the beasts, and Cold Track knew they would not last through the day. Dan Ponder never came within five hundred yards, and Martin could not tell about his pursuer's horse. If Dan's mount were the freshest, then there would come a moment when Cold Track and his wounded compadre must make a stand on foot. He did not relish that prospect.

But he knew his pursuer. Dan was often visible, and Cold Track was no longer in doubt of his identity. He knew that Ponder would be no easy man to shake. Perhaps not even thirst could do it. But he also knew the folly of giving himself up. Cold Track pushed his tired horse on and pulled Bart behind him. He didn't like the prospect ahead, but he certainly didn't intend to give Dan Ponder an even chance.

It did not occur to him to abandon Bart. Wilson had stuck by him; he'd pull the wounded man along with him.

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After an hour he pulled up to rest. This alkali flat he was following stretched for miles with no break in terrain that would enable Dan Ponder to come closer without being seen and having to chance Martin's rifle fire. Cold Track changed Bart's bandage. The bleeding had finally stopped. The wounded man had a fever and Cold Track fed him a few sparing drops of water. But Bart had not lost consciousness.

"You're a danged fool to hang on to me, Cold Track," he whispered.

Cold Track shook his head. "We'll see this through," he promised. . . .

There had been hotter afternoons, but Dan Ponder could not remember them. The glare from the salt-streaked flats made his eyes ache until his head was a dull heavy weight. For hours he had continued this listless pursuit of a quarry which shunted away from any incline, which veered from one dry alkali lake bed to the next. Every so often Dan stopped as they did, and watched Cold Track Martin dole out water to the wounded Bart Wilson.

Dan himself was thirsty. He had taken up the pursuit because he had not believed that the winged man could hold up; he had been sure that they must turn for a finish fight. Now he was beyond considering the wisdom of his chase. The thirst and the sun had done that to him. He would stay on this trail until it was over.

He wondered, as Cold Track had done, about the comparative strength of their horses. Pursuer and pursued had moved at a snail's pace throughout the afternoon's heat. All three mounts would have to stand up till dark, and then again in the morning until water could be found. If Martin continued to hold this direction, they would be near the springs north of Midland by about noon. If, that was, they could stand thirst that long.

Mirages danced before Dan's eyes as he rode slowly after the two rustlers. He saw gleaming springs, bright green trees, and, at times, hundreds of men ahead of him instead of only two. And at times he seemed to be more asleep than awake, for he actually dreamed of things out of the past—of Lucy dying, of his fight with Kim Barrett in Tascosa, of the two-day gun battle in Lincoln, New Mexico, of incidents out of his boyhood. Then he saw, as clear as day but in grotesque proportions, Cal Emory's grinning face and bright beady eyes, and Jane Ellwood's look when she threw back her head and studied him with those dark challenging eyes, and he heard the Senator's voice branding him forever as nothing but a gunslick.

The sun began to drop and his eyes and head cleared. His throat was still raw and parched, but the aching in his temples eased and he rode more warily. Cold Track and Bart must pull up for a rest; no wounded man could ride all night. Once they pitched camp Dan could figure his play.

AHEAD of him Cold Track was also thinking about camp. There were a few drops of water left, enough to see Bart through the night. Morning was something else, but there was no point worrying about morning until the night had passed.

There was little brush in these alkali beds, which even a land-faring man could tell had once been under salt water. Sparse patches grew on uneven jags of land no higher than a man's head. It was small protection indeed. But, shortly before sundown, Cold Track dismounted, stretched out his saddle blanket, helped Bart to lie down.

Bart's face was beet red with his fever. Martin felt his pulse, and heaved a deep sigh. He tried to talk to his compadre but Bart did not have the strength to answer. The wounded man's parched swollen lips formed a pitiful plea for water. Cold Track shook the canteen to appraise its content, then permitted a few drops to trickle down Bart's throat.

Still he begged. Cold Track had to refuse.

Eight hundred yards away Dan pulled up, dismounted, and sat on his haunches in Indian fashion, patiently waiting for darkness. Cold Track hurled a flood of curses in his direction. Then the rustler grabbed his rifle and fired all its shots in a mad, reckless, useless volley.

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Panic gripped Cold Track. For all he knew Ponder had a canteen and food. Also, despairingly mused the rustler, Dan's horse could be fresher. He and Bart had pushed their mounts for a full twenty-four hours. Those beasts had little energy left. Now they had sunk to the sand. Cold Track might be able to kick them up the next morning, and again they might be incapable of motion.

Any way Cold Track figured it, the cards were stacked against him. He rolled to his feet in sudden decision. Holding his rifle high, he walked slowly toward the motionless man who had pursued him through these horrible hours.

After fifty paces he threw down the rifle. His voice croaked out:

"Ponder, Dan Ponder?"

For a moment Dan did not answer. Then he forced through his cracked lips his recognition of the man he had fought against in New Mexico.

"What are you doing here, Cold Track Martin?"

"Bart's winged," said Martin, trying to shout but managing no more than a rumble. He kept walking on. Now only about two hundred yards separated the two men. Ponder still held his rifle.

I could bear down on him, Dan thought. I could draw a bead and let him have it from here.

"Bart's hurt bad," went on Cold Track. "Gotta get him to water, Ponder, and to food."

"Drop your pistol," Ponder said coldly, "and I'll take you both in."

"No," croaked Cold Track. "Drop your rifle, Ponder. Gimme a fighting chance, at least.

Dan hesitated. Cold Track was still advancing slowly.

A wide grin formed on the rustler's unshaven face.

"That ain't much to ask, Ponder," he pleaded. "You can take me and you know it. But I wanna fight you face to face, Ponder."

Dan threw the rifle away in a slow deliberate gesture. Then he rose to his feet. He took a few steps forward.

THERE was no fear in Cold Track Martin's face. There seemed to be resignation; there was that in his voice.

"I'm not kidding myself, Ponder." He spoke from a hundred yards away. "They said you were better than the Kid or Pat Garrett either, that you just didn't do as much bragging."

Dan was silent. He was intent on this slow walk forward. He did not want to let Cold Track's talk lull him into a sense of false security. A man in Martin's plight would try anything.

Sudden Cold Track stopped. "Close enough now, Dan," he croaked. He stood there, his weight rocking back and forth on his dusty boots.

"Ready, Dan?" he asked.

His voice seemed gentle, friendly. Ponder nodded.

"Then here I go," Cold Track announced cheerfully.

He went. His hand dipped toward his holster. But Dan Ponder's gun blazed first fire. Cold Track never even shot. Dan's second slug hit him as he was falling. Ponder had learned that, to drive a second bullet toward a falling man. A fall might be a ruse, a death trap for a sympathetic cocksure opponent.

But there was no trickery about this. Cold Track Martin was dead almost as soon as he hit the sand. Dan Ponder stared down at him a moment, then turned to his horse. So stiff and weary was he that it was almost more than he could accomplish to swing into the saddle.

Dan rode to where Bart Wilson lay, his gun ready for any surprise shot. But Bart was still unconscious. Dan examined him. Cold Track had not exaggerated; the rustler was bad off. Still his lips begged for water. Dan fed him the remaining few drops in the canteen.

Then Ponder climbed back into the saddle again. He rode around the flat slowly, until his eyes sighted a strip of silvery sand. The Apaches had called such sand "cienega" and the white man had taken up the word for want of a better.

The sand seemed as dry on the surface as the baked alkali dust, but there was a dif-

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ference in its feel. This sand had a rubbery texture; it hardened instead of flaking. Back and forth Dan forced his weary horse. He had drawn muddy water from such formations before, but never under such painful circumstances.

He could feel his horse weakening under him. Twice more he forced the animal to tread the width of the *cienega*, then he rolled out of the saddle. More correctly, he flopped down from the horse's back. Dan Ponder had lost control of most of his muscles.

He bent over the sand. It was a little damp, but nothing like water yet. His cracked lips formed a curse. Water was no more than ten or fifteen miles away if he could ride a straight course. But was there a horse of the three which would bear him, and could he abandon a wounded man?

Then, as he sat brooding, as near to whipped down as he had ever been, almost as near as a man could get, he heard a little sucking sound beneath him. There was some kind of motion beneath the sands. The surface broke with a small pop, and a little water gurgled up. Dan grabbed his horse's bridle and, too weary to remount, pulled the animal after him and went stomping back across the *cienega*. Water was there beneath him, but it was deep and had to be forced to the surface.

There were more popping sounds. The horse balked and Dan permitted the animal to drink. He lay down himself, burying his face in one of the tiny pools, spitting out the sand. He took his hat, tore off his kerchief, filled the kerchief with handsful of the wet sand and squeezed drops of water from it into his hat. This time he drank deep. There was some alkali in the water, but a man so thirsty did not heed it.

HE FILLED his hat again and carried water to Bart Wilson, emptying his hat into the canteen, forcing the mouth of the container into Bart's lips. The rustler's eyes flickered and opened. Dan propped up his head and returned to the *cienega* leading the outlaw's horses. They provided for themselves, as his own was doing. Stomping with all four feet, they were cutting the *cienega* to ribbons. Dan filled the canteen. He took the empty container from Cold Track's horse and filled that also.

Then he went to sit by Bart Wilson and to sip water slowly. He did not hobble the horses. He knew it would be some time before any of the three beasts had sated their thirst. They would not drift far from the cienega.

Bart was trying to speak. Dan bent close, but the outlaw's words were inaudible.

Bart Wilson died there, still trying vainly to speak.

Dan Ponder took all three horses, riding them at a walk, dividing his weight between them. Midland was only five miles away; there Dan ate and drank and slept until full daylight.

He sold the two extra horses and hired a wagon. He retrieved the two bodies, then drove the 40 miles to Big Spring.

It was dark when he reached the Senator's house. Jane answered his knock.

"Is your father in?"

The Senator was right behind her; there was no need of her answering.

"Your fence cutters are out in the wagon, Senator," Dan said quietly. "What do you want done with them?"

"Take them down to the livery stable and turn them over to Jake," ordered Ellwood. "Drop by the bank in the morning for your pay."

The Senator offered to pay in cash, but Dan preferred to open an account.

He discussed with the Senator the thoughts he had had while riding home with the two bodies. He could not explain why Cold Track had cut Ellwood's fence.

"They drove some cattle across the wash," Dan pointed out. "When I cut toward the caprock to head them off I expected to see them driving your cattle ahead of them. But they weren't."

"I've known all along it was for spite," Ellwood growled.

Dan disagreed. Cold Track Martin was not a two-bit rustler. Whoever had set Cold Track onto the Senator's fence had paid him, and Bart Wilson also.

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"I wasn't one of the Rangers who brought Martin in," Ponder said, "but he was heading quite a layout. I thought he was sent up for a long stretch."

"Probably escaped," said Ellwood.

Dan made a mental note to find out. If Cold Track were indeed an escaped prisoner then there would be a reward coming.

"Anyhow, Senator," Dan said, "the squatters aren't guilty. None of them could afford a hired hand like Cold Track."

SENATOR ELLWOOD brooded over this.

"There's something," he admitted. "Ponder, I've always considered myself a shrewd business man. So is Kelly. In my opinion Kelly is as good manager as there is. But last year we lost money, both of us."

"I've ridden your fence carefully." Dan shrugged. "I'm a fair tracker, Senator. I'm willing to swear there are no signs of rustling."

"Yet this Martin—this Cold Track—was a rustler?"

"Some shakes as one." Dan nodded.

"Dan," said Roger Ellwood, "I want you to keep on riding my fence. I can tell an honest man when I see one. Your trouble is not dishonesty."

Dan demurred. "I dunno, Senator. It's *bueno* with me, for a while. I need the hundred per. But I want my range back. I want to start up my brand again."

"That is wasted money and effort, Ponder," Ellwood said harshly.

"You told me that before," Dan said. "It's my money and my effort. I'll ride your fence if I can run my stuff too."

The Senator hesitated.

"What few head I can start with won't take up too much of my time," Dan said.

"All right," Ellwood agreed.

Kelly Snyder walked in and the Senator reviewed Dan's opinions for his benefit. Snyder concealed his reactions well. He nodded in agreement.

Dan walked across to the saloon, leaving them in earnest talk.

Cal Emory was playing solitaire at one of the tables. He gave Dan an aloof nod, but Dan was conscious of Cal's look upon him as he faced the bar and tossed down his whiskey. Then Cal walked slowly toward him and asked for a private word.

Dan agreed.

"I came through Midland yesterday, Ponder," said the slim man. "Got to palavering with the livery stable man. He told me about a hombre riding up and leaving three worn-out horses and renting a buckboard."

"Did he?" Dan murmured.

"Sure did." The same grin came to Cal's face, the same gleam to his bright eyes. "That's the trouble with having a rep, Ponder," he added. "You can't get away with anything. That man got to thinking, and he remembered you."

"Yes," Dan said. He waited a moment, then asked, "What does all this add up to?"

"What do you want to fool around with this two-bit stuff for?" demanded Cal.

"Suppose," Dan said, "you run your business and I run mine."

Cal's grin broadened. He rocked back and forth on his toes.

"I'll take that, Ponder," he nodded. "I'm butting in. But don't figger for a moment I'm taking it because of that rep you're so proud of."

"I'm not proud of it," Dan said curtly. He sighed. It was hard to hold back that rushing feeling inside. "You seen to have a notion, Emory," he added harshly, "that I'm still posing as a gunslick and want trouble with anybody who doubts that I am one. That isn't my style, Emory. As far as I'm concerned you're the toughest man in Howard County. You're a bad man from Bitter Creek. You're a rip-tail roarer from Pike County, Missouri. I don't give a damn."

Cal stared at him a moment. The grin hung on his lips, but there was no amused gleam in his eyes. A redness grew in his face, and his shoulders dropped.

"I'm all of those things," he said slowly, "and then some. Don't ever forget that, Ponder."

He turned back to his solitaire game. He did not look up as Dan had another drink and then walked out.

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PEOPLE began arriving for the dance in early afternoon. Ellwood's cowboys set up the platform. Later it would be taken down and the boards stored over Fisher's store.

Whole families stretched picnic cloths and exhibited all kinds of cakes, jellies and preserves. There was fried chicken and barbecued beef and all manner of pies. The children played around the courthouse yard while the elders visited from one spread to the next. Not to visit a woman's cloth and partake of her specialty was to insult her.

Dan Ponder went from one group to the next. He did not want to. But Lucy had loved these women, and they had loved Lucy. He had not spoken to any of them in five years. He wanted to show them that he remembered their courtesies to his slim smiling wife. He wanted to show them that in spite of the talk they had heard about him he was still a friendly sort of man, appreciative of friendly people, eager to be a good neighbor.

The dancing began at sundown. Dan Ponder danced with each woman, the married ones first. Then he finally asked Jane Ellwood to dance with him. She preferred to talk. They stood on the edge of the crowd, and he saw the discontent in her dark eyes and the droop to her mouth. She was the daughter of Senator Ellwood, but she was not happy. Her eyes moved restlessly over the group as if searching for someone.

Kelly Snyder danced with her next. Dan Ponder watched her expression and knew the answer to one question he had asked himself more than once. Snyder would never get her. Who would? Dan smoked a cigarette and thought about that. Having the Senator for a father certainly cut down the list of eligibles, he mused. Dan's eyes followed her and he smiled at his own thoughts. Why not him? Wouldn't the Senator explode! His daughter marrying a gunslick!

Then Cal Emory came. Cal wore a silk shirt and kerchief and new gabardine trousers. Cal claimed Jane as a partner and she went to him willingly. Cal handed the fiddler a gold piece and the musicians obediently played a waltz. Only one other man could waltz and he soon stopped, leaving the floor to Cal and Jane.

He was graceful, and Jane looked as light as a feather. They were well cast as partners and all eyes followed them. Jane's cheeks showed that she appreciated the attention paid them. The music stopped with a crash and Cal Emory bowed and stalked away.

Dan Ponder smiled. The tinhorn, he thought. The sorry little tinhorn.

He left Jane Ellwood standing alone. Dan stepped quickly to her side.

"Pretty," he murmured. "Mighty pretty."

The music began again and he took her in his arms.

"You're a nice man, Dan Ponder," Jane Ellwood murmured against his shoulder. "Why do you have to be wrapped up in a memory?"

He did not answer. He was glad when the dance was over.

At least one pair of eyes closely watched Dan and Jane Ellwood. The thought came to Kelly Snyder that the Senator's daughter might possibly fall for the lean man who seemingly bore a charmed life and carried magic guns.

Kelly Snyder glared at Dan Ponder and knew the man must die.

Kelly stepped in to dance with Jane again. Dan yielded without protest. Dan watched then and wondered why it was that he could not control his dislike for Kelly Snyder. What Kelly had done had happened a long time ago. Dan watched and mused, and a question came again to his mind.

A hundred times lately he had asked himself why the Senator was changing his brand. It added up in a business way, but most outfits were too proud to change. Dan watched, and his thoughts ran free, and for the first time it dawned on him how simple it would be to change a sloppy Bar O to a careless but seemingly legal Bar T.

He thrust such a notion out of his mind for the moment. But that very night he wrote to Austin asking how Cold Track Martin had secured his freedom.

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KELLY SNYDER had watched him dance with Jane and the next morning Kelly tested out his latest idea on the Senator.

"Senator," he said, "I want to hire my own crew. Maybe I'm taking your boys and spending too much time with my own stock. I'll hire my outfit and ramrod 'em both."

The Senator readily agreed. Ellwood had been thinking along the same lines. Snyder took riders on Ellwood's payroll and worked stock that didn't belong to the Bar O.

Kelly went to Pecos for his riders. He selected them carefully. They were men who knew Dan Ponder's reputation and who talked cold turkey over their whisky tumblers.

Dan Ponder had overcome odds of two to one. Cold Track Martin and Bart Wilson—he had killed both of them. But now the odds were four to one. Their opportunity would come. . . .

Dan tethered his horse outside the hotel and went in for supper. He was tired physically but in a gay humor. He had just freed fifty Hereford yearlings on his range. Despite the Senator's apparent failure with blooded stock, Dan was buying nothing but Herefords from the word "go."

He greeted Bessie gaily, but she did not respond in kind.

"The chicken, fried," Dan said, "apple pie and a smile. I'm getting plumb weary of your long look."

She forced one to her face, but it was a weak effort. He watched her move about the dining hall. Two brakeman sat together, and their coarse looks and suggestive talk followed her around the room. She came back to Dan's table to bring sugar and cream for his coffee.

"Don't let those men bother you," Dan said. "I can shut 'em up real quick."

There was no love lost between railroad workers and cattlemen. The railroad men

Cold Track pushed his tired horse on again

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had a saloon of their own into which cowmen seldom ventured. And the brakemen, conductors, at al, seldom came to Charley's.

"They're not bothering me," Bessie said. "Don't pay any attention to them, Mr. Ponder. They carry on like that and don't mean a thing."

Dan nodded. But it was obvious that something unusual was preying on her mind. He ate slowly, wondering how he could help.

"What's eating on you, Bessie?" he demanded when she brought his pie. He leaned back in his chair and held her look. "I thought you and me were *compadres.*"

"How do you know anything is wrong?" she countered.

Her tone and her reddening eyes gave her away.

"That's simple," Dan said, "unless you're the type of woman who cries about nothing. I don't think you are."

"No," she said. She sighed. "Oh, I've just been given the air, that's all," she said with an effort at lightness. "It has happened to me before and it will happen again. I'm used to it."

There was bitterness in her voice. This country had not been easy on her, Dan thought. Even a tinhorn like Cal Emory rode over her roughshod.

"Emory?"

She nodded, then went off as another customer came in. She stood then across the dining room, ignoring Dan.

He paid for his meal and walked directly toward her.

"I want the straight of this, Bessie," he said firmly.

"Isn't it my affair—and his?" she demanded.

"Could be," he conceded. He caught her shoulder. "But maybe I'll make it my affair."

HE COULD tell that this was no ordinary mood with her. Her lips curved in a smile, but it was far from a happy expression.

"You're good at guessing things, aren't you, Mr. Ponder?"

"I've had this Emory figured out all along," he said. "I tried to steer you clear of him."

"Yes, I knew," said Bessie with a sigh. "I wouldn't listen. I didn't believe you."

He looked around him. There were still customers in the dining room.

"I don't want to hear it here," he said, "but I want the whole story. I'll wait around 'til you get off."

"You can hear it if you want to," she answered with a toss of her head. "but you won't do anything about it. You're not about to jump Cal Emory out. Nobody around here is."

He did not reply to that, not in words. But he went into the hotel lobby and waited.

In a half hour she motioned to him from the dining-room door.

"I'm through," she said sullenly. And she walked out onto the street, leaving him to follow if he wished.

"All right," Bessie murmured as he kept pace with her. "Cal Emory has given me the air. Isn't that his right?"

"Maybe," Dan admitted. "But maybe not."

He hesitated. It was hard for his kind of a man to ask a woman any such thing. But finally he demanded, "Are you in deep, Bessie?"

Her bosom shook with her sigh. "I'm in as deep as hell," she answered.

The bench in front of Fisher's was empty. Dan sat down and pulled her down beside him.

"I won't let him get by with that Bessie," he said grimly. "I'll haul him back and make him marry you."

"In the first place," she snapped, "you're not man enough."

"Don't fret any about that," Dan said harshly. "You fell for a cheap act, Bessie. Cal has been throwing his weight around and getting by with it just because no one thought it worth the trouble to jump him. He's no tough number, girl."

"That's where you're wrong, Dan," she insisted. "Cal has treated me like dirt, but he isn't the cheap four flusher you and everybody else around here thinks he is."

"I can take him every day in the week and twice on Sundays," Dan declared, "so

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don't worry about that. And I'll get a kick out of doing it."

"Even if you could," she went on, "it's too late."

"Why too late?"

Bessie's laugh shocked him. It was almost hysterical.

"This is funny," she told him. "You'll laugh at this, feeling about the Senator as you do."

"The Senator!"

It was all Dan Ponder could do to keep from shaking her out of that high-pitched laughter.

"Yes. It's too late, Dan." Her words came in gasps between her peals. "He's marrying her, Dan. Marying the Senator's daughter, high-and-mighty Miss Jane Ellwood herself."

"No!"

"Isn't it funny?" Bessie demanded. There were tears mingled with her laughing now. "He told me a month ago he could have her if he wanted her. I made him a bet. I thought he was kidding. But he wasn't. And I've lost the bet, Dan."

"Look, girl," snapped Dan, "talk sense. When is this tinhorn marrying Jane? Or has he already?"

"They're getting hitched tonight," Bessie said. Now she was no longer forcing her laughter. Tears shone in her eyes and her lips quivered. "She's slipping out, of course. He's meeting her at Castle Rock with a buggy. They're driving over to Stanton where he has everything ready—a license, a preacher, and a hotel room."

DAN stared at her. He could not possibly doubt her, and yet he could not accept her words.

"Did he tell you all this?" Ponder demanded.

"Yes," she said bitterly. "He's proud of himself. And I don't blame him. He wanted to show this country a few things. Now won't he be able to look down on 'em and sneer, he and his bride!"

It was barely twilight. Dan thought swiftly. The tryst at Castle Rock would be set for a night hour. Then the eloping pair must drive to Stanton, 18 miles away.

"Are you sure about Stanton?" he asked.

She nodded. Now the tears stopped. "What are you going to do, Mr. Ponder?" she asked timidly.

"Stop it," he answered immediately.

"Why?" she demanded. "What right do you have to step in?"

"I'm taking the right," he said grimly.

He stood up. "Let her go on," Bessie said fiercely, seizing his arm. "Let her go on and make a fool of herself. She's always been so much better than anybody else. Let her find out she's made out of common dirt just like the rest of us."

Dan disengaged his arm. "You don't mean that, Bessie," he said with gentle rebuke.

She lowered her head before his look. "No, of course not, Mr. Ponder," she admitted.

She caught his hand again as he started off. "Please, Mr. Ponder," she begged, "don't think he's easy."

"I can take care of myself," he snapped.

"I know you're tough," she said, "but Cal is something, too. I've never seen him handle a gun but I know he is."

A cold grin formed on Dan's lips. He had never been much of a braggart, but he privately agreed with Cold Track Martin that he had been the best with a gun of all that quick-shooting crew which rode for John Chisum. There had been more talk about Bill Bonney, the Kid, and Pat Garrett, the tall hombre who went straight, but Dan had never felt any awe before either of these men.

He was sure that he could handle a kid in a loud-colored shirt who had been nowhere except to Tascosa, and not there until after the tough hombres had ridden on.

He rode with a faint derisive smile for his own thoughts. The shock of learning that Jane meant to elope with the self-styled bad man had partially worn off. It would be like her, he though, to thrill to a defiant mocking character such as Cal Emory tried to be. A woman would not know, as a man knew, that such a character was never all wool and a yard wide.

A high-spirited girl like Jane Ellwood, rebellious since childhood against the tight

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confining net this country wove around its women, could deceive herself that she loved such a man when it wasn't love she felt at all but a resentment toward a pattern of life which dealt harshly with her notions, her hopes, her dreams.

I have to stop it, Dan told himself. From the way another man would look at it, it's no affair of mine. But I have to stop it because I know her kind of woman. This is something, this mood of hers, that can't be handled harshly. Emory I can deal with the easy way, head-on, and to hell with him. But Jane will be something else to handle.

SHE MUST know a sympathy that she has never had, except the hint I gave her, and that I couldn't carry on any further because she wouldn't understand it. She would grasp at it for something else, as she was grasping at Cal Emory for something else.

She begged for it, but I had to hold back on her.

His grin broadened. Wouldn't the Senator relish that—Dan's description of his daughter as a beggar?

The lights of Stanton twinkled before him. It was barely eight o'clock; it wasn't likely that Emory could have collected his runaway bride and driven to this town in a buggy. Many times in these rushing waves of speculation Dan had wondered if Bessie had told him the truth, if she had purposely misled him, or if she had innocently passed on a false picture Cal had painted

It had not been wise of Emory to confide his plans to a scorned woman. If Cal were smart he would not have mentioned a word of this to anyone; for if he knew it the Senator would have had a gang of men there to stop him and to haul his daughter back to the ranch by brute force if need be. The nervy little devil, thought Dan, he was willing to take that chance. Maybe he even wanted it. Since the day he had ridden back Cal Emory seemed to have been asking for a showdown with any and all who didn't like his attitude, and his manner was unbearable.

He'll get that showdown, Dan thought grimly. He's going to learn the difference between a two-bit gunman and the pearl-handled variety.

A voice mocked at him from inside. You've wanted this all along, that voice taunted. You felt it the first time Cal spoke to you and let you know that he wasn't afraid of the rep you left in Tascosa. It's that part of you that is like the Senator said.

You're just jumping at an excuse to declare yourself in. You'll never rest easy until you show up Cal Emory. You don't give a damn about Jane Ellwood, you're only taking up an impersonal challenge like you did with Satchel Burke in Tascosa and with Hank Edwards in Roswell. The Senator was right. When a man straps on a gun he is never good for anything else.

His lips tightened. I've taken his sass, he snarled back at that voice. I could take it some more. But I'm not letting Jane Ellwood throw herself away on him. A man can get rid of the wild streak in him his own way, like I did. He can turn back on any trail he rides and nobody holds it against him, if he proves himself. But there would be no chance for her to turn back. Emory would take her to Tascosa, or to Pecos. She'd be a widow soon; such a man couldn't keep going in the style he pretended was natural to him. Then were would Jane be?

HE PULLED up in front of the hotel. A waspish gray-haired man was behind the desk.

Dan hesitated. "Do you want a room?" snapped the clerk. "If you do, say so."

"I don't need a room," Dan said. I'm supposed to meet a hombre here. Named Cal Emory."

"He came in yesterday and paid for his room," said the old man. "It's waiting for him. If he doesn't show up to claim it he still doesn't get his money back."

Dan nodded. So the eloping pair had not reached the hotel yet.

"How many preachers in town?" he asked.

"One," was the terse answer.

"Where does he live?"

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"Two doors down."

"Much obliged," Dan grunted.

He walked outside. From a more cooperative soul he secured confirmation of the Reverend Harlow's status as the only preacher in town. Dan walked two doors down and knocked.

Harlow opened the door and said, "Come right in," then stopped in confusion when he saw Dan. "I was expecting someone else," he explained.

"You're booked for a wedding?" asked Dan.

"Why, yes, I am," said the preacher. "Why?"

"One Cal Emory and Miss Jane Ellwood?"

"He didn't tell me the young lady's name," said Reverend Harlow. "Why, is there anything wrong?"

"There won't be a wedding," Dan said. "That's all."

The preacher protested. "But the arrangements have all been made. The necessary witnesses are waiting inside. The young man has already paid me—generously. Surely, sir. . . ."

"There won't be a wedding," Dan repeated.

He walked back to the gate and took up his vigil there. He paid no heed to the commotion behind him in Rev. Harlow's house. He was indifferent to the small crowd of curious who gathered to wait and watch. He stared down the Big Spring road as if his concentrated attention upon it would bring Cal Emory and Jane Ellwood there sooner.

Now a buggy came out of the dark and swept toward him. He did not stir. He watched stonily as Cal Emory leaped out of the seat and hitched the horses. When Cal turned to the buggy to help Jane out of the seat he said in a low voice, "Hold up, Emory. I want a word with you first."

Cal whirled, his hand dropping. Then he recognized Dan as Ponder moved closer. The moonlight was faint enough to keep each man wondering about the other's expression.

"So it's Ponder," Cal said in a flat voice.

The onlookers pressed closer. Cal gave them his mocking attention, carefully appraising them. Then he looked back to Dan.

"What is it, Cal?" Jane asked from the buggy.

Dan answered for himself. "Me, Jane. Dan Ponder."

"Dan, what in the world. . . ."

"Three guesses as to what Mr. Ponder wants," said Cal with a low jerky laugh, "and you can have two of 'em back."

JANE came out of the seat without a helping hand. She stood between the two men, looking from one to the other in confusion, in sudden nervousness. And the daughter of Senator Ellwood saw in both faces something she had never suspected she would find in any man.

"Go on in, Jane," Cal said harshly. "It will take me a minute to find out what Mr. Ponder has up his sleeve."

Jane didn't want to obey. She waited for Dan to speak.

"Yes, Jane," murmured Dan. "Go on in."

Still she hung back.

"You're wasting our time, girl," snapped, Dan.

She bent her head and stumbled up the walk.

Cal stood there loosely, that grin on his face.

"Didn't expect to meet you here, Ponder," he said. "Since when are you running the Senator's errands?"

Dan ignored the attempt at levity. "You got your chance, Emory," he said slowly "Get back in the buggy and light out. I'll see that she gets home."

Cal tilted his head and his grin broadened. "Me light out, Ponder?" he asked cheerfully. "You're the one who has a chance, friend. Don't get yourself killed over something that isn't any of your business."

I'll have to hand it to you for one thing, Dan thought. You've got more unmitigated gall than anybody I've bumped into in a long time.

Neither spoke for a moment. Then Cal said, in a voice that sounded calm but

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which was pitched a little high, "No use waiting around, Ponder. I don't imagine either one of us is interested in running."

Dan agreed.

"The light is bad on this side of the street," Emory went on in the same tone. "What say we walk over there?"

Dan nodded.

They might have been crossing the street for a drink together, the way they paced slowly, close enough to each other to reach out a touching hand. But suddenly Cal stopped.

"I like it here, Ponder," he murmured. "Feels good to my feet."

Dan walked on. Ten steps, twenty, thirty.

"Mighty far for the light, Ponder," Cal called.

Dan turned. They stared in each other's direction, each man straining his eyes to see the other. They had a shape to aim at but not a face.

By God, thought Dan, he's still not afraid. He's got more guts than any tinhorn I ever bumped into!

"Want a count, Ponder?" Emory asked courteously.

"Ready when you are," Dan grunted. He was a little nettled. The play was being taken away from him. It was Emory who was showing a cool condescension.

"I'll count three, Ponder," said Cal. "One—two—three."

Dan's hand dipped. A quick exultant feeling flashed through him. It was always thus when he made his draw lightning-quick, brought up his gun at the right angle, knew he had his man and. . . .

All of this happened in a split second. In the next instant Dan sensed that, as good as his draw had gone, he was too late.

He spun on his toes, moving quickly, leaping like a cat. But the bullet got him anyhow. He had crouched with his wild instinctive leap to avoid this flying lead. A half-step and a crouch kept the slug from tearing right into his heart. The kid had shot that quickly, and that straight.

As it was, Dan went down anyhow. He went down knowing that Emory had nailed him under the left shoulder, and that the impact had caused him to shoot wild and to lose his gun.

He hit the dust like a ton of brick. Everything went black before his eyes. There was a faint pin point of light from somewhere far off. He heard footsteps. He heard voices. His own lips moved, but no sound came forth. All he could manage was a little laugh which was no more than a gasp. Then even that tiny gleaming point was swallowed by waves of pitch darkness.

KELLY SNYDER had ridden into town to put in an order for more barbed wire. But he found Senator Ellwood entirely too upset to worry about routine business.

Jane, Ellwood explained in distress, had not been seen since about eight o'clock the night before.

"She said she was going for a ride," said the frantic father. "She's done that often lately. But usually she is home by ten o'clock. Her horse came home without her."

"She could have been thrown," said Kelly.

"The hell of it," growled the Senator, "is that I haven't the slightest notion which way she rode. How many boys are in with you Kelly?"

"Only one, Beckett."

"Ride back and get the whole crew out," ordered Ellwood. "Comb the whole country. She usually liked to ride toward Signal Mountain, but she could have gone elsewhere."

Kelly obeyed without protest. Most of the things he did were like that, impersonal, automatic. If things arose that did not directly contradict the course of action he had mapped out he accepted them calmly and discharged the unexpected obligations efficiently. Ellwood spoke of him as a man who was never ruffled, but such was not the case. He could be indifferent to details, but any major change in his plans left him for a time incapable of either reason or physical action.

"The Senator's daughter didn't come home last night," he told the Bar O crew. "Probably her horse threw her somewhere."

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And he gave explicit directions for their search. He himself rode in search of Jane Ellwood. The prospect, even though he considered it faint, that she had been thrown from the saddle and killed by no means displeased him. He did not consider Jane a direct challenge to his ambitions, but her death in such a moment would play into his hands.

Not the least advantage of such a tragedy to him would be its effect upon the Senator. Roger Ellwood would be a broken man if such a fate befell his daughter. For Kelly Snyder to get where he wanted, he would have to step over men broken by one means or other. Kelly experienced only the desire of completed conquest, not of combat. He would appreciate any unexpected development which made achievement of his ends simpler.

By noon they had woven back and forth across all of the range used by the Ellwood, Snyder, and Morgan spreads without finding any sign.

Kelly rode in to report their failure to the Senator.

"Spread out," said Ellwood. "I don't see what got into the girl. She never rode so far before."

Kelly nodded.

"This is killing me, Kelly," the Senator said hoarsely. "I don't like to think that anything but a fall could have happened to her, but this not finding anything . . . . Get the boys out over the county. She's a pretty girl. We've cleaned most of the riff-raff out of this county, but some rapscallion could have drifted in. Get the boys to ask questions. Send one or two of them through the homesteads across the creek. If somebody pulled this to get even with me, I'll . . . . I'll kill them with my own bare hands."

Kelly returned to the saddle. He dispatched two riders toward Coahoma to work through the homesteads on both sides of the road. Two went toward Garden City with the same instructions. Two went north with orders to ride about as far as Ackerly.

Kelly himself rode westward, calm and unhurried.

HE STOPPED at Grogan's store, ten miles from town, for a drink. Before he had done more than say "howdy" the storekeeper flung at him eagerly, "Hear about the big fight in Stanton last night, Snyder?"

Kelly shook his head. No word had come to Big Spring of Cal Emory's victory.

"That Emory kid, the one that went off to Tascosa or somewhere, got jumped by Dan Ponder."

Snyder was immediately interested.

"And get a load of this," went on the excited storeman, "Emory shot the hell out of him. Beat him to the draw and got him in the shoulder. Ponder is still living but they aren't sure he'll pull through."

Kelly's eyes gleamed. He held no resentment of Cal Emory; Cal had never menaced his plans.

"Emory shot down Ponder," he murmured. "I thought Ponder was something with a gun."

The storekeeper grinned. "This Emory kid must be all he acts like he is. It was fair all the way. My cousin saw it. Emory just beat him to the draw. Sam says he never saw such slick gun-pulling in his born days."

Kelly nodded. He was sure it would take quick and great shooting to beat Ponder.

"So Ponder isn't expected to live?"

"Dunno as it's that bad. They got him in the hotel over at Stanton."

"What was the fight about?"

Kelly put the question innocently enough. It was a logical thing to ask.

"Over some gal. Emory was running off with her and this Ponder elected to stop him. Ponder stopped Emory's lead instead."

Kelly thought this over a moment. The only Big Spring girl he could think of who would be involved was Bessie Lang.

"That just proves," declared the storekeeper, "that women cause more shooting than coyotes. They all come to an end sooner or later, and a woman is usually at the bottom of it. This Ponder rode 'em high, wide and handsome for a long time. But when he got to mixing women and

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shooting—no man has a chance against that."

Kelly covered the eight miles on to Stanton at a quicker pace. It seemed that another circumstance not of his making would play into his hands. Dan Ponder was perhaps a menace he overestimated, but still a strong one, strong enough that Snyder had hired four gunslicks to await a chance to gang up on him. What if Dan Ponder died from this gun battle! Kelly Snyder's heart beat overtime. A light gleamed in his eyes.

He found the small town of Stanton agog with its own importance. People could talk of nothing else. Kelly was shown where both men had stood, and where Dan had fallen.

"They'll talk about that fight for years," declared the saloon keeper proudly, as if any and all inhabitants of the sleepy village could share in the personal credit. "That Dan Ponder was known all over the west. Folks say he was tougher than the Kid out in New Mexico. Yet this button Emory went walking right into him. Never batted an eye. Wasn't scared a bit."

"How is Ponder?"

"Hear different things," said the barkeep. "He's over at the hotel and he doesn't see visitors. The last word is that he's got a fighting chance."

KELLY did not ask about Cal Emory, nor about the girl who evidently had been the cause of the fight. But he led over to the hotel, and with some effort to hide his eagerness asked about Dan Ponder. At the moment Ponder was all that was in Kelly's disciplined thoughts.

The inn's proprietor felt his importance as landlord for the losing fighter.

"I knew when he walked in here last night and asked about Cal Emory that there was trouble coming," he said to Kelly. He had told this story a hundred times already, but was as enthusiastic as if this were his first account. "I could tell it by his eyes. Had a fire in 'em, a slow deepfire. I didn't get outside in time for the actual shooting, but I was one of those who helped bring him in.

"We didn't know what to do with him for a moment. Then this Emory walked over to us and told us to use his room. Cool as a cucumber he was. He told us to get him a doctor. Then he got on his horse and rode off. Went at a gallop too, I tell you. Just threw himself in the saddle and was gone before you could say Jumping Jehosophat."

"How is Ponder?" asked Snyder, enduring the chatter in the hope of learning that Dan would cash in his chips.

"Haven't heard lately," the clerk said regretfully. "His gal is looking after him. She's been downstairs several times for water and things like that, but won't say much."

He pointed to the stairs. "There she comes now. Ask her yourself."

Kelly turned. His eyes almost popped out of their sockets at what he saw.

Jane Ellwood stopped on the final step, and stood there staring at Kelly, with one white hand on her throat. Then she came forward slowly.

"Kelly, you've been looking for me?"

There was regret in her voice, and yet defiance. She acted as if she realized for the first time that her disappearance had caused a long search.

"Everywhere," Kelly murmured. There was confusion in his voice and in his manner. This was more than an unexpected detail; this was some thing which caught him flat-footed and which he could not decide about at once.

"I'm sorry," Jane said, chokingly. "I should have sent word somehow. I guess Dad is worried sick."

She had intended to telegraph her father immediately after the wedding. She had not thought about it since then. She had not left Dan's bedside except to go downstairs for water, fresh bandages and soup.

"Near crazy, Jane," Kelly said.

"Tell him I'm all right. Tell him I'll stay until Dan is out of the woods. You go back and tell Dad I'm all right and I'll be home in a day or two."

"Then he's. . . ." asked Kelly, nodding upward.

"He'll live," Jane said calmly. "For a

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time we thought he wouldn't. But he's case-hardened; he'll pull through."

"That Emory," murmured Snyder. "I wouldn't have given a plugged nickel for his chances with Ponder."

"I never doubted that he could beat Dan," Jane surprised him by saying. "I'm only grateful that Dan will live through it."

Kelly stood there uncertainly. "Tell Dad where I am," Jane said again. "I'd better get back up to Dan."

She refilled her pitcher from the hotel's bucket and went back up the stairs. Kelly stared after her a moment, then bought a cigar and sat down to mull over this unexpected turn of affairs.

As yet it wasn't clear to him just which man the Senator's daughter was involved with. According to the reports he had heard, she had set out to run off with Cal Emory, and Dan Ponder had attempted to stop her. But it was Dan Ponder she was staying with now. It didn't make sense to Kelly.

But one thing was clear. If Ponder recovered, and became the Senator's son-in-law, Kelly Snyder's pipe dreams were blown sky high. He grunted to himself. Dan Ponder wouldn't live that long.

FOR a long time Dan Ponder floundered helplessly in the black sea which had engulfed him. At times the pinpoint of light gleamed like a far-off signal fire; at times it wasn't there. Yet it seemed to him he had retained consciousness through all of those dark hours. There wasn't a moment of the time, in his fancy, when he didn't realize what had happened to him. That was why he laughed at times, and threw Jane Ellwood into terror, because she could not imagine what the sounds were and thought him hysterical.

I thought he was a tinhorn, he ranted to himself. I had him sized up as a cheap little four-flusher. I didn't believe he could whip even a second-rate badman in a fair fight. I was going to shoot him down not only because of Jane but because I was tired of him and wanted to get rid of him. And what happened? It was the best draw I ever made. What can't the kid do? They wouldn't believe this in Lincoln, Roswell or Tascosa. If someone were to say out there that a nester's kid shot down Dan Ponder before his gun was even up, they'd be laughed at, hooted at, and plenty of money would be raised to cover all bets.

He felt the hands fumbling with his wound. At times he flailed out angrily; those hands were hurting. He felt it when water was trickled down his throat or when spoonsful of soup were pressed between his lips. He accepted these services gratefully. But he had no idea whose hands they were. The faint beacon of light never grew strong enough for him to see who was in the room with him. He sensed the presence of other people. He was grateful for their efforts.

He had seen other men die after such gun battles, men who died alone, without assistance, with nothing in the end but a cold burial in a public graveyard which was spoken of as "boot hill." Every western town had one—Tascosa, Roswell, Lincoln. All self-styled gunslicks were supposed to end up there with their boots on. But for some reason Dan Ponder wasn't there yet. Dan was lying in a bed with his boots off, and cool damp cloths were held against his forehead, and someone with a very gentle touch was making him take nourishment even though he had no appetite for it.

It did not seem to him that he ever slept. It was his impression that when finally the dark wave receded and he could see again that no more than an hour's time had elapsed since Emory's bullet had crashed into him with a sickening thud and he had slipped downward into the dust. The dark that greeted his eyes now was a natural dark, that of twilight. A lamp burned by his bedside. For a moment even this brightness was too much for his eyes to take. Then they no longer ached and he studied the girl sitting by his bed in a straight-backed chair, her shoulders drawn together, her face turned away from him.

He forced a grin. "Howdy, Jane."

He was a little shocked himself at the weakness of his voice. It was little more than a whisper.

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She bent over him. There was gladness in her eyes and on her face, glad relief.

"Howdy, Dan," she answered.

He studied her without speaking. Color rose in her cheeks at his look, her lips tightened, and she tilted her head.

"I didn't go with him, Dan," she said. "I don't think I ever intended to."

"No," he said. "That was why I stuck in my two cents worth. I knew you didn't want to."

Her eyes dropped. "It was a wild thing to do," she said. "I've been sitting here all day trying to figure out what got into me. It wasn't his fault, Dan. It would have been awful if you had killed him just to stop me from doing something silly."

"I know." He nodded. "But I didn't think I could stop *you*." His face showed a faint smile again. "I was sure I could handle *him*."

"I didn't want you to fight," she said. "I knew you couldn't do it, Dan. You didn't have a chance."

He stared at her. Bessie had said the same thing, predicted the outcome of any battle between himself and Cal Emory with the same calm assurance. What was it, Dan thought, they could see in Emory that men couldn't?

He started to speak but she cut him off. "You mustn't talk any more," she ordered. "You're going to be all right. I'm grateful for that, Dan."

He did not protest when she turned off the lamp. The black sea was creeping back up again. This time he wanted healthy sleep in time to avoid the deluge.

IT WAS shortly before midnight when the Senator pounded on the door of Dan's room. He had galloped all the way. He still found it hard to believe Kelly's story. Jane was dozing on a makeshift pallet. The wounded man's condition had been steadily improving, after the usual rush of fever with sundown. He had eaten heartily of soup and bread soaked in condensed milk at nine o'clock and had shown an eagerness to talk which his nurse had firmly discouraged.

Jane lit a lamp and faced her father with tight lips. For a moment the Senator could only grope for words. The hot surging anger which had replaced his growing panic was still there, but it did not blaze forth. Jane Ellwood had never been afraid of her father. At an early age she had succeeded to the duties and responsibilities of humoring him in his small moods and aiding him in his small moments of helplessness.

Finally he said, his voice strained, his eyes pleading, "What got into you? That was the biggest fool thing I ever heard of."

She had appeared calm before him, but actually she had been tight and tense inside. She had been prepared to lash back with as many angry words as she received. But the Senator's physical inability to speak his mind immediately removed the strain between them. Without knowing just why he did so, Ellwood adopted the only attitude that could make his daughter suffer.

"I don't know, Dad," said the girl, turning her head away from him.

Then a smile came to her lips. "Women are like that, I guess, Dad. Though I reckon few of 'em are as big fools as I am."

The Senator coughed. Now, he reproached himself, I'm hogtied for sure. She has always been able to twist me around her finger with that smile of hers and that reproach for her own weaknesses.

"Thank God," he murmured, "no harm came of it." His eyes hardened and his lips tightened. "There will be some talk," he added, "but no real harm has come of it. We can live down a lot of talk."

Her eyes met his squarely. "There is nothing for them to talk about," she stated simply. "I started out to marry a man. I didn't. That's all there is to it."

He was grateful for her reassurance, more grateful than he could show.

"You'd better come home with me, girl," he said gently. "You can't stay here in a hotel and look out for a man."

Jane nodded "I'll go with you in the morning," she said. "Dan is much better. I think he can sit up tomorrow."

"Hit in the shoulder, was he?"

"Yes. A few inches lower and he would never have made it."

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The Senator was silent, remembering his own derisive opinion of Cal Emory's bad-man pose.

"We owe something to Dan Ponder, Dad," Jane said slowly. "He came hell-bent-for-election to save me from myself. I don't know how he found out about it, but he did. You know how stubborn I can be. I would have gone through with it—the wedding—if he hadn't come. The minute I saw him—and knew what he was going to do—I was glad. I wanted a way to back out without doing it myself. The minute Dan fell . . ."

She shuddered, and her voice fell off. Then it picked up again. "The minute he fell," she continued, "and Cal put his gun back in his holster, he walked over to me and looked at me. I couldn't look at him. He didn't say a word. Neither did I. Cal looked at me and then down at Dan and jumped on his horse and . . ."

"He should know," growled the Senator, "that he isn't fit to marry a daughter of mine. He ought to be horsewhipped for his gall."

Jane looked at her father and laughed softly. "Don't get any notions about trying it, Dad," she said, "or sending any of your boys to do it for you either. You'll just have the cost and trouble of burying 'em on your hands."

Ellwood stared at his daughter. "I can't get it, girl," he murmured. "You, of all people, admiring a killer—taking up for him."

She nodded. "It's strange," she said. "I wonder about it myself. It doesn't make sense. But about Cal Emory . . . well, there's something there that not everybody sees."

BY MORNING Dan was obviously regaining his strength. His fever did not reappear after his night's sleep, and there was a healthy gleam in his eyes when Jane brought him breakfast. He ate with relish and begged for more.

"Two eggs aren't enough for a starving man, Jane," he said.

"No more, Mr. Ponder," she declared, unmoved.

"I pity the man you marry," Dan grumbled. "You'll ride a tight herd on him."

He said it before he thought. Perhaps even then the remark would have passed unnoticed except that it reminded them of the same thing, and both showed it. Jane Ellwood turned her head.

"You haven't asked about Cal and me," she murmured after a long moment.

"No."

"It's over, Dan," she told him, still not meeting his glance. "It was over without a word between us. You might be interested in knowing that he did the walking off, without me telling him."

Dan did not speak for a moment. Then he asked gently, "What got into you, girl? Why did you start meeting him under Castle Rock?"

"You knew that?"

He nodded. "I was looking for rustlers," he said. "I heard Cal's horse. Then yours."

Her soft laugh mystified him, as did her manner. She was neither penitent nor defiant.

"I don't know what it was about him," she said. "Perhaps . . . oh, I can't put it in words, Dan. Maybe it was his sheer audacity . . . or something."

She stood up. "I'm putting you on your own, friend," she said in a different voice. This was her old self—talking straight, in almost a man-to-man, not whispering something about a confusing inner being she did not expect anyone else to understand. "A Mexican woman is coming to look after you. The hotel will provide meals and anything else you need. The doctor will check on you twice a day."

Dan nodded his thanks. "And it's all paid for," she added.

"That isn't necessary," he told her.

"It's necessary. The Bar O pays its own way. We owe you more than that."

There were times, he thought, when she was the spitting image of her father. He lay quietly watching her while she made ready to leave.

"There is no debt between us," he said after a moment, a harsh note creeping into his voice. "You didn't throw yourself away on a two-bit gunman. I'm glad of that."

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She tossed her head. "Two-bit gunman?" she questioned. "Nobody knows better than you about that, Dan Ponder. What does that make you?"

He was a little surprised to find that her taunt did not arouse him. The old pride wasn't there any more. He no longer experienced that stirring inside, that rushing blood, that tenseness in his shoulder blades.

He grinned at her.

"I'll walk out of here in a few days," he said lightly. "That's good enough for me, honey—to walk away from the only fight I ever lost."

"You had to be carried away," she said.

"Sure." He nodded. "But anybody would have done that for me."

She stared at him. Only two men had ever been able to treat her like that. All others she had been able to arouse, to disturb, to dominate. Kelly Snyder was the lone exception, but Kelly had never aroused a spark of interest in her. She had known Kelly at once for what he was—cold, methodical, indifferent to the things in life a woman held dear.

She had agreed to elope with one of these men. Except for Dan Ponder and a burst of gunfire she would have seen that mad impulse through. Tears came into her eyes as she looked at Dan. She did not fail to notice the faint smile on his unshaven face. Jane Ellwood bit her lips. When a man mocked her, he took away from her the only weapon she knew how to use.

"Yes," she said faintly, "anybody would have done as much for you. It's all on our side, Dan."

DAN'S letter came from Austin and was forwarded to him. He was able to sit up by the time it arrived. He read it slowly, and carefully examined the accompanying letter.

Captain Hugh Markey had sent him the entire file of correspondence on Cold Track Martin. It must be returned, of course, but Captain Markey gave permission for Dan to make copies.

He studied one letter in particular, and was more puzzled than ever. According to this correspondence Cold Track Martin owned his pardon to Senator Ellwood's political influence. The Senator had personally written to the Governor and had strongly urged clemency for Martin.

Yet Cold Track and an owlhoot buddy had slashed the Senator's fence, apparently just for the hell of it.

The Senator came, to murmur his thanks awkwardly and to assure Dan that his pay would go on.

"I owe a lot to you, Ponder," said Ellwood. "My girl means more to me than my bank, my ranch, or everything put together."

"I was glad to do it, Senator." Dan shrugged. "I couldn't let a fine girl like Jane throw herself away on a drifter."

His eyes twinkled. "I've been a drifting gunslick," he added. "I know what worthless hombres they are. All they got is their shadow on the trail."

Ellwood nodded. The Senator thought a moment, then said slowly, "I'm about to decide I was wrong about you. I believe you're a good credit risk, Ponder. Come to see me if you want a loan."

"Thanks, Senator."

Dan could not help but be pleased. For he knew that personal gratitude had not inspired this offer. The Senator did not run his bank that way.

Dan hesitated, then took the Austin letters from under his pillow. The missive signed by Roger Ellwood was several pages in length. Dan selected the second page and handed it to Ellwood.

"Is that your handwriting, Senator?" he demanded.

Ellwood took one glance and shook his head.

"No," he said firmly. "Why?"

Dan shrugged. "Just curious. You handle a lot of checks and papers, Senator. Would you guess at whose it is?"

The Senator studied the page more closely. "Resembles Kelly's writing," he said dubiously. "But mainly I'm concerned with signatures, Dan. I wouldn't say positively."

Dan Ponder was satisfied. Of course it had to be Kelly Snyder.

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Ellwood was studying him closely.

"What are you up to, Dan?" the Senator asked.

"Just trying to figure something out," Dan parried.

The Senator stood up. "Give me three guesses and I'll hand you two back," he said harshly. "It must be the slickest game that was ever worked. I've wracked my brain trying to find even the smallest hint, and I haven't figured out a thing."

"Get this straight, Senator," Dan said. "I haven't made any kind of accusation. I won't till I'm sure of what I'm doing."

"Good," said Ellwood. "Come and see me when you're sure, Dan."

IN A week Dan Ponder was able to walk about. Curious glances followed him everywhere; at times his lips would tighten as he realized the attention he was attracting. But he was pleased with himself, at his calmness. He didn't feel like hanging his head. The end of the world hadn't come just because another man had beaten him in a gunfight.

I owe the little guy a favor, thought Dan. He took the pressure off. It's all on his shoulders now. The slicks who got fired up with liquor and their own importance wouldn't go looking for Dan Ponder. They'd want the man who beat Dan Ponder, who spotted him and than beat him cold. He can have it, Dan Ponder thought. I'm glad it's all his and I'm riding away from it.

Mostly he played checkers in the hotel lobby or sat in a rocking chair and watched people pass. Soon he wasn't such an object of curiosity. Before long they won't even remember my name, Dan mused.

He was sitting there, just watching, when Kelly Snyder rode up and entered the bank across the street. Dan's eyes gleamed. Surely, he thought, it wouldn't work out this easily. Surely circumstances hadn't done all this for him. He had expected that it would take weeks to find where Kelly kept his other bank account. That had to be the answer—an account in another bank that the Senator didn't know about.

Kelly came out again. Dan hid his face behind a newspaper. He wasn't sure whether Snyder saw him or not.

Kelly rode off. In a few moments Dan arose and walked across the street. He asked change for a twenty-dollar goldpiece and lingered to talk with the cashier.

"You're picking up all right, Mr. Ponder," observed the bank clerk.

Dan nodded. "I'll live a spell." He rolled a cigarette. "Thought I saw an old *amigo* of mine heading this way," he murmured. "Fellow named Snyder."

"No, don't know him," the cashier said. "Heavy-set man—dark eyes—wearing a new gabardine outfit and riding a chestnut horse?"

The clerk remembered. "Oh, yes, he was here just before you came in. But that's one of our customers from the Pecos Valley. Kyle Scurry."

"Kyle Scurry," repeated Dan. "Nope, not the same man. Never heard of a hombre named Kyle Scurry."

He nodded and went back to the hotel. He ate and went to his room for his usual long afternoon nap.

Kelly Snyder was not through with his banking in Stanton. Kelly shipped some of his cattle from here—the surplus he concealed from the Senator. The commission man he dealt with had a draft for him and he returned to the bank within less than an hour.

The cashier was a talkative man. So few strangers came by and so little happened that he seized upon the slightest excuse to make conversation.

"You know a guy named Snyder?" asked the clerk.

Kelly did not betray himself. "Several," he answered calmly. "Why?"

"You must look sorta like one of 'em," said the clerk. "This man Dan Ponder—the gunslick who got shot down the other night—was in asking about him. Got a glimpse of you, I reckon, and mistook you for him."

"From a distance I look like a lot of people." Kelly shrugged. He tried to keep his voice casual, but the cashier sensed his resentment.

"Sure," the clerk said hurriedly and

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apologetically. "A lot of people look alike from a distance."

Kelly stalked out and held his horse to a trot until he was out of town. Then he spurred the animal into a gallop. He would send two of his four gunmen to Stanton to keep a close watch on Mr. Dan Ponder! He and the other two would stay ready.

He reached the caprock and observed the steep pass through which the road dipped. Here was the place, he decided. Here they would finish the job Cal Emory had started. The thought of Emory brought another idea. Why not enlist Emory's aid too? He considered the idea, then rejected it. He couldn't risk it. Now everybody knew Cal Emory by sight, and Emory still talked too much.

CAL EMORY walked slowly across the street and into the saloon. It was Saturday afternoon in Big Spring and a half-dozen outfits were represented there at Charley's, and on the courthouse steps and on the benches before Fisher's Store. He knew that every eye was on him. He knew that tongues were wagging behind him. A little crook to his lips expressed his appreciation of their quietness, their close attention.

The saloon was filled with men, but a way was swiftly opened for him to reach the bar. Emory's silver dollar rang on the bar as he asked for a drink.

Then he turned, glass in his hand. He stood there tensely alert. This was Dan Ponder's town. Another challenge might be in the cards.

But no one spoke to him. He finished his drink and walked out again. Outside he looked up and down the street speculatively, then turned toward the hotel.

He chose his direction before he observed that Roger Ellwood and his daughter were walking toward him.

He slowed up as he saw them. He acted as if he would turn and go in another direction.

Then he resumed his even deliberate pace.

Jane saw him from forty paces off. She also came to a stop, then went on. Crimson showed in each cheek. She felt her father's trembling beside her, and put a hand on his arm.

"Easy, Dad," she whispered.

Closer, closer. Jane would not lower her eyes. She chatted to her father about anything she could think of. She looked every way but straight ahead of her.

Then, when no more than an arm's reach separated them, she pretended to see Cal Emory for the first time. Her lips moved once and no sound came forth. Then she forced a smile. It was a weak effort, but it was all she could do.

"Howdy, Cal," she said.

She was conscious of his strange look. There was no mockery here, no challenge. Through tight lips he returned her greeting, and lifted his hat politely. There was a swagger about his gesture, true enough, but that was Cal Emory. He walked on without looking back.

He reached the hotel. He was standing outside when two of Snyder's riders came out. One of them recognized him.

"Howdy, Emory."

Cal knew him, but his greeting was not warm. He felt only contempt for this Lon Jackson. Jackson did his killing from behind a boulder or a brush clump and usually with a Winchester rifle. But Emory spoke. He was curious more than anything else.

"Well, if it isn't Lon Jackson," he drawled. "What you doing up this way? Pecos get too tough for you?"

"Working here," said Jackson. "Riding for a hombre named Kelly Snyder."

"Riding, hell," grunted Cal. "Who does Snyder want bushwhacked?"

Jackson's face showed a scowl, but he made nothing of this insult.

Cal walked to the saloon and had another drink. He brooded upon why Kelly Snyder had hired Lon Jackson. It could be that Snyder didn't know Lon and thought he was hiring a good hand. But, no—Lon wouldn't even touch a branding iron.

LON JACKSON and his friend hung out at Charley's. Cal Emory noticed that some days they did not even ride out to the TO ranch. He hadn't believed

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Jackson would soil his hands with honest work.

Cal walked slowly about the town and cursed the calmness everybody showed. Didn't they have sense enough to know that hell was about to break loose? He didn't know where; for the life of him he couldn't figure that out. He had never heard of any kind of a feud, and nobody gave him any information when he dropped hints. There wasn't any prospect that one cattle outfit was getting ready to move onto another range. This was the Senator's country. Roger Ellwood had it organized.

Cal Emory sat and brooded, and he couldn't figure anything except that the Senator himself was the intended target. There hadn't been any more fence-cutting, not since Dan Ponder had driven in with the bodies of Cold Track Martin and Bart Wilson. Cal Emory hadn't been so puzzled by that deal at the time. He just hadn't cared one way or the other. But now, looking back, reflecting . . . Cold Track didn't risk his hide cutting fences just for meanness.

Cal Emory was young, but he had covered some miles. He had ridden enough to know that beyond one hill lay just about the same things that were on this side. He had seen other range wars. He had been in town where riders like Lon Jackson lolled around by the dozen.

A range war was usually easy to figure out. Either the big man wanted to whip some little ones back into line or some of the little ones were teaming up on the big one.

Nobody was bothering the Senator, not that Emory could tell. That seemed the logical thing—somebody was bothering the Senator and the dirty work would be done in the name of Kelly Snyder's spread. But now nobody was getting ambitious. Nobody was trying to throw his weight around.

The more Emory thought about it the more confused he was. This wasn't like anything he had ever seen before. There wasn't any ripple of excitement among the townspeople to show which way the wind blew.

A half-dozen times he avoided meeting Jane Ellwood. He would turn into a store or the saloon to keep from meeting her. She could not help but observe it, and she would not have that treatment from any man.

"Cal," she called to him when he started to turn into Fisher's. "Wait for me."

He had no choice but to obey. He stood and waited, and a quirk came to his lips.

"Why are you avoiding me, Cal?" Jane demanded in her straight-forward manner.

"Any reason to see you?" he countered.

"Yes," was the prompt earnest answer. "I want to tell you that I appreciate the way you acted in Stanton—after the shooting."

Cal shrugged. "Wasn't any use hanging around. You had changed your mind. You made it clear as day."

"Yes," Jane said. "I found it out right then. The minute I saw Dan Ponder lying in the dust I knew I loved him."

"When's the wedding?" Cal asked, cool, mocking. "As soon as he can get about?"

"There won't be a wedding," Jane answered. Her sigh was an honest one, and so was the look in her eyes. "I don't think he wants me, Cal."

"Then he's a damned fool," Cal Emory said quickly. "For a while you appealed to me just because you're the Senator's daughter and I'm one of the no-good Emorys. I was after you just for the hell of it. But I got to knowing you better. Hobble that temper of yours and you're a woman any man can be proud of. Especially a washed-up gunslick."

JANE ELLWOOD studied him and her smile was warm, grateful.

"Thank you, Cal," she murmured. "I've never had a nicer thing said to me."

"That's how it is," he muttered. He seemed to be ashamed of what he had said.

"Then why do you dodge me?" Jane asked quietly.

"I have to," Cal said grimly. "I've started enough talk about you already. Tongues would start wagging every time

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we're seen together. Don't you know you can't be friendly without starting gossip?"

"I know that," Jane Ellwood said slowly. "And I still want to be friendly with Cal Emory."

He stared at her. Not many honestly friendly gestures had been made to Cal Emory, the son of a scrub farmer, a boy who didn't feel like stepping off into the street to give cattlemen the full breadth of the sidewalk. He had ridden off to get a new start and he had come back on a visit just to show his old stomping grounds that he didn't have to take sass from any man.

What Jane Ellwood offered was what he least expected . . . from an Ellwood of all people.

A grin came slowly to his face. The beady glint left his eyes.

"I'm through dodging you, Jane," he said lightly. "You can wrap any man around your finger."

But he didn't mean it lightly and Jane Ellwood knew it.

Still Lon Jackson and his compadre loafed around town. Still Cal Emory tried to figure out the deal. Finally he mentioned it to Jane.

"I'd like a confab with the Senator," he told her. "Something's going on and it doesn't make sense to me."

"I'll tell him," Jane said.

The Senator frowned when she approached him.

"I've nothing to discuss with Emory," he said harshly.

"Don't be silly," his daughter said, scoldingly. "Cal wouldn't ask to see you if it weren't important."

She did not win him over easily, but finally he yielded. He glared at Cal Emory and gruffly asked what was on Emory's mind.

"It's this way, Senator. Maybe it's none of my danged business, but Kelly Snyder has hired four new riders."

The Senator nodded, wishing again that he had not yielded to his daughter's persuasion. He did not care to sit here and discuss range business with Seldon Emory's son.

"Yes," he said, "Kelly has hired his own crew."

"What for?" demanded Emory. "Two of 'em are hiding out or something. The other two spend their time hanging around Charlie's. I know one of 'em from way back. He's a bushwhacker, Senator. He's a cheap killer if I ever saw one."

Ellwood frowned and thoughtfully considered this.

"There's trouble coming up," went on Cal. "If you know what it's about and you like your hole card, then it suits me. I don't care one way or another. I just came to palaver with you because you might be the target . . . and because you're Jane's father."

AT FIRST Ellwood resented this. He glared at his visitor. Then the Senator changed his mind. A number of random thoughts came together into one conviction.

"No," murmured the Senator, "I don't think I'm the intended target."

Then he added, "But I think I know who that target is. Thanks for talking to me, Cal. Thanks very much."

"Keep the change." Cal shrugged, rising to his feet.

"Wait a minute." Ellwood stopped him. "I want to hire you, Emory. I want to hire you to protect a man."

Cal sat down again.

"Who?"

"Dan Ponder."

Cal Emory chuckled. This certainly beat everything! The Senator wanted to hire him to protect the man he had shot down in a dusty street.

"Why is Snyder after Dan Ponder?"

"For very good reasons," Ellwood answered promptly. "I'll make it worth your while, Cal."

Emory hesitated. He was still fascinated by the irony of this situation. It was much more than the coincidence that he would be a bodyguard for Dan Ponder. Here was Senator Roger Ellwood turning for help to the son of Seldon Emory—the squatter's boy, the no-good drifter! A smile came to his face.

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He rose slowly to his feet. He had quickly made his decision. That was what he had come back for—to show this country what he was made of, what had been spawned beyond the salt flats.

He put on his hat and tilted it at a jaunty angle.

"I'm not hiring out for a spell, Senator," he answered slowly. "But I'll keep an eye on Ponder for you. I'm not busy just now. I got the time to give you a jump."

Cal Emory rode into Stanton and dismounted before the saloon. He stood there a moment uncertainly, then went into the building, that touch of a swagger about his walk. Several men lounged there. Cal gave them a quick searching look. Recognition gleamed in one man's eyes.

"Howdy, Emory," he said.

"I'll buy a drink," Cal offered carelessly. That was the reward for knowing him, for tipping off to other men that Cal Emory had come and would stand at this same bar and they were welcome to crowd up alongside if they wished. "I'll buy a drink for the whole shebang," he offered generously.

What the hell, he thought, why not let them all share in this moment! Right here he stood and he looked us over and offered to set 'em up and we drank with him and he acted just like an ordinary sort of guy, not like a killer, not like the man who shot down Dan Ponder! His eyes twinkled. Somebody made a sally and Cal Emory's laugh rose high and loud. Not that he was amused at the joke—it was an old one. Cal Emory laughed at something else entirely.

After a while Cal checked in at the hotel and learned that Dan Ponder was almost able to ride. He came face to face with Ponder himself. Emory could not repress a smile. Ponder—the man he was here to protect—met him with cool hostility.

"Howdy, Emory," Dan said after a moment.

"Howdy, Ponder," Cal answered.

Emory walked on to the saloon without another word, chuckling softly to himself.

He studied the faces of the men lounging there. He could appaise men; he soon decided which were Snyder's riders. Their hands told him that. He struck up an acquaintance and learned that they were from the Pecos country also. He did not have to ask them what their business in Stanton was. Their faces told him that whenever Dan Ponder appeared on the street.

Another thing told him why Red Beckett and Duke Ellis had been hanging around Stanton. Dan Ponder came into the saloon two nights later and revealed to several men that he was riding home the following morning. Beckett and Ellis disappeared almost immediately. Cal Emory walked to the livery stable and learned they had checked out their horses.

Cal Emory was up early and in the saddle before daybreak. Still he concealed his purpose from Dan Ponder. Mostly it was because he was enjoying the strangeness of this role, but he also had a practical reason. Even if they were knowingly working together they should be split up.

THE Stanton road dipped through the same caprock in which Dan Ponder had laid his ambush for Cold Track Martin and Bart Wilson. Sometimes no more than a hundred yards wide, but often several miles of twisted upheaval, this divide was like a jagged full-length scar across the wide forehead of this western country.

For forty years men had utilized this barrier, but never peacefully, for it served no purpose in peace. In this patchwork of dipping passes and rocky crests the Comanche Indians had ambushed gold rushers and apprehended stage coaches and wagon trains. Their white brothers had learned from them.

Amidst this tangle of granite and greasewood, of sage and thorny cacti, Kelly Snyder posted his riders to wait for Dan Ponder. Kelly studied the cliffs overhanging the road. This type of fighting was new to him, but it was to his liking.

Snyder was giving way to the first passion he had known since years ago, when he had been foolish enough to make even a half-hearted play for another man's wife.

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There was a metallic gleam in his eyes, a bite in his voice, a nervous surging in his blood. He checked his rifle to make sure it was clean, and did some filing on the triggers of his revolvers. Guns had never been everyday items in Kelly Snyder's costume. He held them awkwardly. But his fingers caressed them as he rode ahead of his seven chosen riders. For the first time in his life Kelly Snyder was looking forward to using a gun.

He stationed his men carefully. They were to let Ponder enter the pass, then block the way both ahead and behind. Kelly was taking no chances on this charmed life Dan seemed to lead.

The sun beat down upon his riders, but their foreman offered no respite and they bore the heat stolidly. Not one of them was disturbed at his assignment, or regretful. Such things were part of the pattern they had known since boyhood.

Two horsemen passed unchallenged, none of the TO men revealing themselves. Then Kelly Snyder, who had posted himself near the mouth of the pass, lifted his hand warningly. He could recognize the approaching rider from a mile away. He watched Dan come with cold eyes. He had reserved for himself the obligation of firing the first shot. . . .

Dan Ponder rode slouched in his saddle against the noonday heat, favoring his wounded shoulder which had begun to throb painfully after the first few miles. Had water been near Dan would have stopped to rest himself and his horse, but the nearest spring was two miles past the caprock, at Grogan's, so he pushed doggedly on.

The railroad and the winding dusty route he was following both dipped into the same pass through the caprock. Legend had named the dip Rattlesnake Pass because, when the Texas and Pacific had been blasting out a track bed, hundreds of rattlesnakes had been uncovered and several workmen had died from their bites.

Dan gave the rims no suspicious study. He had no reason to believe that death was lurking within the shadows the heights cast.

Kelly Snyder tensed and raised his Winchester to his shoulder. He took careful aim and waited for Dan to ride nearer. It would please Kelly to kill Dan Ponder himself.

Then . . . *crack!*

The shot made an eerie sound. Kelly Snyder leaped angrily to his feet. But none of his hirelings had disobeyed his orders. That shot had been hurled in warning, and a hundred yards above him Kelly got a fleeting glimpse of the man who had fired it.

But at that moment he didn't recognize Cal Emory. Cal had watched Kelly Snyder set his ambush from a safe distance, that same quirk coming again and again to his lips. Now, darting from one cover to the next, Cal Emory was coming down to the fight.

Snyder cursed and shot anyhow. The range was too far, but the spatter of bullets in front of him told Dan Ponder that he was the target. He could have turned and ridden back to Stanton. But that meant leaving the man high on the rim to himself. And Dan swiftly realized this man had saved his life.

DAN rolled from the saddle, snatching his rifle clear, and sent his horse on with a slap on the flank. Two shots hit dangerously close to him. He ran low, zigzagging, and gained the shelter of a clump of boulders across the draw from Kelly Snyder. But lead zinging a few feet from his hiding place warned him that an assailant was posted above him. Red Beckett had reached a perch on the north rim. From there Beckett cut off escape in that direction.

It was the same to the right, to the left, ahead of Dan Ponder. He threw a shot across the pass at a furtive shape—Duke Ellis—but it was too far by many yards.

Ellis and Kelly Snyder were working down the opposite slope, carefully testing the range before moving closer. Dan rolled over and squinted up at Red Beckett's shelter. Beckett was the man who had him cut off. If he could work higher, eventually gaining the rimtop. . . .

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He saw another shelter fifty yards away and started to bolt for it. He slipped on the uneven ground and went rolling downward. Pain shot through his shoulder and side.

But that fall saved his life. Two swift shots came tearing down from Beckett's gun. Carefully the marksman had estimated Dan's pace and direction. Had he not slipped, either would have finished him.

He rolled back into his shelter, and not a second too soon; lead from Duke Ellis's rifle now menaced him. He was in range of two guns and the others were working closer.

Callahan now came down the opposite slope, in full view, standing erect. Dan tried to drop him, but the distance was too great. Tauntingly, Callahan moved across the draw to join Beckett on the south ridge. Dan shifted his position slightly, studying this new menace, waiting for him to come within range. But a shot from Beckett made him drop down again. Beckett's gun held him to a single squatting shelter. Beckett's fire made it possible for the others to move almost at will.

For long moments now no shots had come from above, from the man who had warned Ponder. But Cal Emory had not quit the fight by any means. Cal watched the maneuvers of Snyder's men and grinned. They were spreading wide. If he and Dan could get closer together they could take 'em one at a time. That was the way to fight in the hills.

He breasted a rise and now commanded the cover which screened Red Beckett from Dan Ponder's fire. He stood and waved to Ponder. Dan recognized him for the first time. Dan lay there wondering why Cal Emory had come to his aid. It didn't add up, but he wasn't looking a gift horse in the mouth. Emory had saved his life for sure.

He lay and watched Cal wriggle toward Red Beckett. What Emory was doing made sense to him. Dan kept an eye on the others, but mainly he watched Beckett. Emory was trying to drive Beckett from behind his cover. Twice Cal shot; Red looked around him desperately. Cal slid down a slight fall and pebbles flew just over Beckett's head. Beckett had to dart for new cover. He kept himself screened from Cal's fire, but he had to take a chance on Dan's quick shot.

He took the chance. He lost, and went rolling downward to the foot of the pass.

Dan gambled that his attackers would be momentarily stunned by Beckett's fall. He left his shelter on the run and tore across to a pile of boulders fifty yards away. He made it safely, though a scattered volley from across the pass menaced his final few steps.

Cal Emory chuckled. For with that maneuver Dan Ponder had worked into a position commanding Duke Ellis's shelter. Now Dan could deal with Ellis as Cal had with Beckett. Emory came sliding down another twenty feet. Ellis tried to get a shot but Dan sent him diving for cover. Dan held Ellis pinned tightly and Cal Emory shot him through the back.

SNYDER'S own scheming had defeated him. But Kelly had not figured on the rifleman advancing down from the rimtop. Now they were three against two, but the position was all against them. Dan Ponder had come up and Cal Emory had slipped down. Two guns against three, but since Snyder had stationed them so far apart it was actually two against one.

Snyder's own carefully selected ambush had backfired against him. He trembled in rage and in sudden fear. The qualities which had made this man strong and dangerous were of no avail at this moment, when decisions must be made quickly. Kelly Snyder's weakness rose up to engulf him when he most needed to hold it under firm control. With a curse he whirled and ran for the horses they had tethered atop the south slope.

His two surviving hirelings saw him go. They watched him with mute patient resignation. Then their rifles went sailing into the air and fell clattering on the sandy bottom of the pass. They came sliding down from the rocks after them, their

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hands up. They gathered and waited stoically for any disposition that might be made of them.

Dan Ponder and Cal Emory descended also. They did not fear any ruse from Lon Jackson and his companion. These men had their code. When the ramrod quit, they quit.

"All right, boys," Ponder growled. "Take off. Take off like a sagehen."

Jackson and his compadre needed no second urging.

Dan turned to Cal, studying the grinning youth with wondering eyes.

"I can't figure it out," Dan murmured, "but I'm sure obliged."

"Let it ride," said Cal with a shrug of his sloping shoulders. "Mark it up to a gal you know . . . and haven't got sense enough to marry."

"Jane?"

"Who else?"

"Maybe that isn't true, about my lack of sense." Dan grinned.

"And for the Senator, too," added Emory. "He asked me to keep an eye on you, as a favor."

Dan nodded. While he stood there wondering what to say next, Cal turned away from him.

"You're wasting time," Cal said over his shoulder. "Get on after Snyder. He's yours. Buy me a drink the next time you see me."

Dan nodded and went to his horse. He had turned it loose, but the well-trained animal had not roamed far. He swung up into the saddle and took up Kelly's trail. Yes, Snyder was his man.

He did not run his horse. Snyder had left the road, evidently cutting across the salt flats toward the TO ranch. Kelly had started at a dead run, in panic. No horse could hold such a gait. Dan held a steady pace. The advantage in horse flesh was all his. Kelly's mount had already run this same distance. Dan held himself so as not to disturb his wounded shoulder, and followed doggedly. He would eventually overtake his man.

He did, after two long hours. Kelly was plodding along, a mile ahead. Dan spurred his horse for the first time. He overhauled his quarry rapidly. He lifted his rifle and fired.

His shot fell short. But it was close enough to throw Kelly Snyder into panic again.

KELLY spurred his horse cruelly, but the weary animal just didn't have it. Kelly was forced to realize that.

Then, in the desperation of his throbbing mind, he seized upon the only possibility of victory he could devise. He slowed up his horse, still moving at a gallop but no longer at a mad run. Then, gritting his teeth, he leaped out of the saddle.

He went sprawling. He had expected that. But quickly he was on his feet and he threw up his rifle and shot quickly at his pursuer, now less than a hundred yards behind him.

The bullet whined close to Dan Ponder. Another thudded into his horse, and the animal went toppling to the ground. Ponder landed on his side. For a moment pain chilled him, leaving him weak and gasping.

Twice more Kelly Snyder shot. Both bullets hit close, one nicking Dan's leg. Then Snyder threw his empty rifle away with a curse. He advanced with his revolver, suddenly a brave man, but brave only with the desperation of one who is finished, and who sees it in a fit of wild terror.

Without raising up from the ground Dan Ponder shot him.

For a moment longer Dan lay there. The fall had broken open his wound and it was bleeding again. Then he came laboriously to his feet, suddenly conscious of his fatigue, of his thirst. Dan emptied his canteen. Then he moved in slow pursuit of Kelly's horse. Had the mustang attempted to escape Dan would never have caught it. But the animal surrendered to capture. Dan emptied all of Kelly's canteen too. Then he rode slowly toward town.

The Senator saw him coming down the street, barely holding himself in the saddle, and ran out to help him dismount. Ell-

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wood sent his cashier for a doctor and one of his clerks for Jane.

Tersely Dan described the fight and then what he had learned of Snyder's business activities.

"I'm positive he was draining you," he told Ellwood.

"So am I," the Senator declared. "The whole picture is complete now."

He laid a hand on Dan's uninjured shoulder. "I needed Kelly," he said slowly. "Now I need a man to take his place. Think it over, Dan."

"I will," Dan said. He smiled at the Senator's daughter.

"Jane and I will talk it over," he murmured.

Her eyes told both Dan and her father what the decision would be.

IT WAS a week later. Dan Ponder and Jane Ellwood came out of Fisher's store together. She was talking at a rapid pace, and Dan was nodding now and then, with a warm smile softening the lines of his lean face. There were many things to talk about, many plans to make.

Suddenly Jane broke off. She saw the man walking slowly toward them and she left Dan to shake his hand warmly.

Cal Emory grinned. But there was a difference in his eyes; the bright beady gleam wasn't there.

Dan shook hands with him also. They were silent a moment. Then Cal said:

"I'm pulling out of this country, folks. Thought I'd say so long."

Jane caught Dan's arm, clinging tightly. The Emory grin widened.

"You make a right pert-looking pair," he said, "but I'm not envying you."

Cal Emory pointed across the street. A buggy was pulled up there; Bessie Lang was sitting in it.

"Riding double from here on, Ponder," Cal said. "It'll slow me down some, but I reckon it's worth it."

"Congratulations, Cal," Dan said warmly. "Bessie will make you a wonderful wife."

"Yeah," Emory answered slowly, the grin leaving his face. "What I offer isn't much, but she swears she wants it. I've tried to tell her my kind of a man isn't one to hitch to. She seems to like the idea, though."

"She'll love it," Jane Ellwood assured him.

Cal turned upon Jane, his eyes dancing. "I won't be around to kiss the bride," he drawled, "so I'll collect right now."

Before she could protest he caught her in his arms and kissed her. Then he pushed her toward Dan. Then he turned and went toward the buggy, his shoulders high, a swagger in his walk.

And not once as the buggy disappeared from sight did Cal Emory look back.

Coming up in the next issue

TEXAN, SELL YOUR SADDLE

Some things a son of the Lone Star State won't do . . . even when he's broke and headed for jail

A Magazine-Length Novel

By WALKER A. TOMPKINS

BULLET RANGE

Reilly Meyers had seen too much . . . and the wild bunch was out to frame him, one way or another

Beginning an Exciting Serial

By DAN RIORDAN

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SELMA DIDN'T HAVE anything against marriage . . . except when she was offered as a prize to help the family prosper

THE minute that she heard her uncle's wheedling voice in the yard, talking to her dog, Selma Buckley knew that the old schemer wanted her to do him a favor of some kind. He would never leave his flocks at the very start of the lambing season except for something important.

She went to the door and called out, "I'm in the house Uncle Sim. Come inside."

The old man—he was her father's much older brother—dismounted stiffly and came into the kitchen. He asked politely, "Where's your Ma? And your brothers?"

"Ma's gone over to help Mrs. Sloan have her baby," Selma told him, "and the boys are fixing fence along the river bottom."

The old man sat down. "Beats me why your Pa ever took up farming. I offered to help him get started with his own flocks when he first started to court your mother, but no, he wouldn't have it. Moved down here on the river bottoms instead."

"Well, we've never gone hungry," Selma said tartly. "And most of the time we've had a pair of shoes on our feet. What's on your mind? You never rode way over here right at the beginning of the lambing season to talk about history as ancient as that."

The old man looked at her admiringly. "That's one of the reasons why you and me get along so good, Selmy," he said. "You come right out with it. I never was one to beat around the bush either. Well, I'll tell you—I got some trouble."

"I guessed that," the girl murmured. "What I don't see is what I can do about it."

"Course you don't. I'll make you acquainted with the facts in a minute. Selmy, the price of sheep is down, and I had a chance during the winter to buy out a man at a mighty reasonable figure. Now, I just got to have extra graze for those extra sheep. I just plain got to have it."

"To put it plainer yet," Selma said, sniffing, "you got greedy and

THE HERDER

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"I'm not going to marry for a meal ticket," the stranger yelled

TAKES A WIFE

By ALICE AXTELL

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bit off a mouthful that was bigger than you can digest, and now somebody's got to help you out." She went on. "And what did you have figured out that I could do about it?"

The old man winced. "Girl, sometimes you got an edge to your tongue that's unbecoming to a female. You aren't going to turn an old man down, are you?"

Selma grinned at him impishly. "I think I'll be smart and hear what it's all about before I promise."

The old man looked at her with reluctant admiration. "Well, there's plenty of graze to be had up on Table Top Mesa, that runs along behind the river here."

"You can't drive a flock of sheep up from the river side," Selma told him promptly. "There's a trail of sorts, but I'd never try to take a flock—"

"I know, I know," the old man interrupted, testily. "I'll have to take 'em up from the other side."

"You'll tangle with the Meadows brothers," Selma said. "They use Table Top grass and they don't relish company."

THE old man's snort showed his contempt for the Meadows brothers. "Haven't I been dealing with men like that since long before you were born. There's more graze than they got any use for, and if they're minded to be hogs they can learn different."

"Then what's the matter?" the girl demanded.

"I can't get a herder to stay with the flock," the old man said, "not even offering more money than a good herder's worth. Too lonely up on Table Top. Herding is too lonely a life anywhere. None of the young men want to be herders any more, and a herder I got to have."

"It *is* a lonely life," Selma said sympathetically, "especially up on Table Top."

Her uncle watched her with a crafty gleam in his eyes. "I figured that's where you come in, Selmy. You aren't going to turn the old man down, are you?"

"Just you tell me what I'm to do, first."

Somehow, the old man seemed to hate to come to the point. "Always liked to be out-of-doors, didn't you, Selmy? I used to say you ought to have been a boy."

Selma set down the pan of bread dough she was mixing and stood in front of her uncle. "Uncle Sim, you stop dodging and tell me what you're up to now."

"Well, it's a matter of killing two birds with one stone, you might say, Selmy. Now you, you're a pretty young woman, and naturally you want to get married. What female doesn't? And I got to have a herder."

The girl stared at him in bewilderment.

"So I figured I'd run an advertisement in the paper, and you could take your pick of the lot and marry him. After all, if a man has his wife along, he shouldn't be lonely, should he? A woman can talk for three, as a rule."

Selma got her breath back. "Uncle Sim Buckley," she shrieked, "I will not marry any man just so you can have a herder in the family. Are you crazy, or do you think I am? Don't you dare run any such advertisement."

"Now, Selmy, you haven't given it any thought," the old man protested. "You shouldn't fly off like that without thinking it over. After all, everything I've got'll be yours and your brothers' some day, won't it? It's to your benefit to have a herder for the sheep, isn't it?"

"Not at the price of marrying him, it's not." Selma folded her arm in grim determination. "I'm sorry for your starving sheep, Uncle Sim, but you'll have to think up some other scheme."

The old man sighed, picked up his hat, and got up. "Well, I was hoping you'd see it my way. Some of those young fellers aren't unsightly."

HE STARTED out. Selma ran after him. "Do you mean to say you've already run that advertisement? You scheming old—what did you say? What young men? Where are they?"

The old man turned, with a crafty gleam in his eyes. "Now, girl, how could I know anybody would answer if I hadn't run that advertisement in the paper? Myself, I'd rather listen to the sheep, but seems like

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there's three-four young fellers thinks otherwise."

"That's three or four too many," Selma snaped. "Go saddle a horse for me. I'll send them off. I'll send every last one of them packing."

The old man looked pleased and triumphant for a moment; then, as he saw her face more clearly, he grew uneasy. "I'll fetch you a horse but, Selmy, don't you go doing anything hasty. I got to have a herder, I tell you. Even if you don't fancy any of them, it wouldn't do any harm to coax one of them along for the summer, would it?"

"I'll coax them along with a shotgun," Selma said grimly.

All the long ride down the river and then up into the rougher country below Table Top mesa, Selma maintained a stern silence. After a few attempts on his part to persuade her to help him, the old man dropped behind and followed her glumly, leaving the girl to go ahead alone, with her big black and white shepherd dog trotting gayly beside her.

But in spite of her angry determination, the girl shrank a little when she faced the curious, appraising stares of the three young men who were lounging in front of her uncle's house.

The cook put his head out the door and announced cheerfully, "One of those boys decided he wanted no part of matrimony, and who can blame him? He lit out. But there's another one come since. Never seen such a seedy-looking human being. I got him inside getting a bite to eat."

Selma felt her cheeks burn, but she walked over to the waiting men. "I'm sorry you answered such a foolish advertisement," she said firmly, "but there's one thing about it that you don't know. My uncle put it in the paper without telling me a single word about it. And I'm not marrying anyone just to help him raise sheep. So far as that part of it's concerned, you might just as well be on your way." She drew a deep breath.

"Now where's the fourth one? I'll send him off, too." The look on Selma's face was stern as she marched toward the house.

SIM BUCKLEY protested feebly. "Selma, you might leave me at least one prospect to work on. I might be able to tell him enough lies to get him interested."

"I'm sure you could," Selma said. "But just to make sure there aren't any misunderstandings about this, I think you'd better start over again."

She went inside and headed for the kitchen, her uncle following behind, still feebly protesting. An angry roar in a man's deep voice stopped her.

"What brand of foolishness is this? Who says I'm going to marry some old maid for a meal ticket? I came in here hunting for work and I don't want a wife. When I do, I'll pick out one myself, not have some middle-aged, horse-faced female shoved off on me. Where's my hat? I'm not so hungry that I can't go somewhere else and hunt a job."

Selma stepped into the kitchen. The cook was facing her way, somewhat flustered. The other man had his back to her, and all she could see were patched and torn clothes, reasonably clean, and straw-colored hair that needed cutting. On a chair in front of her was a battered, shapeless hat. She picked it up.

The cook began to stutter, and the young man whirled. "Eh—who? What?"

"Your hat," Selma told him sweetly. "You were looking for your hat so you could leave and not have to marry a horse-faced old maid. Here it is."

He stared at her, open-mouthed.

Selma's voice rose. "Didn't you understand me? Here's your hat, the road's open. You can consider my uncle in dotage for running that advertisement, if you want to, but I didn't have anything to do with it, and the sooner you leave, the better."

Back of her the old man was sputtering protests. "Now, Selmy, don't be in such a hurry to run him off. Said he was looking for work, didn't he? You can leave off the marrying part of it if it suits you both better, but I still got to have a herder."

The young man snatched his hat from her hand and jammed it down on his un-

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kempt head. "I didn't know anything about it till after I'd stoped to look for a job," he yelled. "Fine thing, man can't look for honest work without a woman hung around his neck." He stopped and stared at her again, and she felt her cheeks grow hot. "At that, I wouldn't have thought you'd have much trouble nabbing a husband."

Selma lost the last shreds of her patience. "I don't want one," she said furiously.

The young man started for the back door. "Fine. That's one thing we can agree on, anyhow. Glad to know there's something."

BUCKLEY out-shouted them both. "Now, hold on, young man. If you let a woman's sharp tongue run you out of a job, you haven't got the spunk I was giving you credit for. You were hunting work—said so yourself. Now there isn't a healthier occupation than herding sheep, especially for a man that doesn't care about women. Outdoors all day, nobody to talk back to you—why you ought to like it fine. Now what's your name, and we'll get started."

The young man growled, "My name's Allen Huber, and just because I'm broke enough to take a job herding sheep doesn't mean you have to trot out that rigamarole. I've herded sheep a couple of summers. I know just how healthy it is."

Selma sniffed. "Make Uncle Sim tell you just how welcome you'll be with the Meadows brothers, while you're considering the future state of your health."

The old man said hastily, "It's nothing. I can handle the Meadows brothers. All I need is a herder to stay with the sheep."

"The herder will be the first one to get shot at," Selma retorted.

Allen Huber looked at her. "I'm grateful for your interest," he said dryly, "but I always figured I could take care of myself."

Selma blushed again. "Get yourself killed then. What's a sheepherder or two?"

"Nothing," the young man said, calmly. "They don't even make good husbands."

Selma stamped her foot and then ran outside, and it did not soothe her ruffled temper any to see him standing in the door, coolly watching her as she mounted and whistled for her dog.

"Fine dog," he called. "Is he for sale?"

Selma was glad to be able to refuse him something. "He is not."

The young man seemed unimpressed by her vehemence. "Too bad to waste a good herding dog, running around behind a girl."

Selma spurred her horse and headed for home, not trusting herself to say another word. And she was halfway home before she cooled off enough to stop hoping the Meadow brothers would shoot him and wonder what he would look like, clean and shaven instead of so untidy.

The next thing she herd about her uncle and his sheepherder was when her father came home from town several weeks later.

"Sounds like Sim hired himself a sheepherder with back bone this time," he said. "The way they tell it around town, the Meadows brothers are plenty sore at Sim grazing his flock on Table Top, though they don't use half the grass. They hit this feller's camp one evening ready to tear him apart and run the sheep off the mesa."

"Did they shoot him?" Selma asked. "I knew it would happen."

HER father grinned. "The way I heard it, this Huber did the shooting. Guess they thought he wasn't carrying a gun, but he had a rifle hidden under the wagon canvas where he could reach it. Lem Meadows got off his horse to give Huber a beating up, when Huber pulled the gun. Lem run for his horse, and this young feller just sat there and shot at his feet and yelled at him to run faster. They do say that Lem got his leg nicked a little."

"Well," Selma said, "that won't be the end of it, not from what I've heard about Lem and Joe Meadows."

"You can bet it won't," her father agreed. "If Sim doesn't lose his sheep and Huber his scalp, it'll be a surprise to me. Lem Meadows has threatened to run every head of Sim's sheep over the rim of the mesa."

"I told Uncle Sim he'd been too greedy," Selma said, "but it's a shame to have all the sheep killed. Maybe you ought to try

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to talk him into getting them off Table Top."

Her father looked at her shrewdly. "The Meadows got no legal right to hog all Table Top. I'll tend to my own business. Sim wouldn't thank me otherwise. And this Huber may be tougher than he looks. He drew first blood, that's for sure."

Selma saw Allen Huber again the next day, toward the middle of the morning, while she was hanging out the week's wash.

He rode around the corner of the house, startling her, and evidently coming from the direction of the mesa rather than the road up the river.

"Did you come down from the mesa on this side?" she asked.

He nodded. "Bad trail, but it can be done." He sat looking down at her somberly. "I came to see you, but I wish I didn't have to tell you I shot your dog last night."

"You shot Ring?" Selma exclaimed.

Huber nodded. "Lately there's been a pack of dogs cutting out and running down a few sheep every night. Farm dogs. Ring was the leader. I finally got a shot at him. I didn't make it clean, I'm sorry to say, but from the blood trail I saw this morning he couldn't have made it very far. Crawled into some rocks and died, I reckon." He looked unhappy. "I'm sorry I had to kill your pet. I left your uncle with the sheep and came down to tell you about it."

"Why, what's the matter with you?" Selma asked. She whistled sharply and Ring came trotting up from the barn, his ears alert. "You didn't shoot Ring."

Huber leaned forward. "Why, the markings were identical," he exclaimed. "I thought sure—who's got a dog that looks just like him?"

SELMA shook her head. "I remember there were three puppies in the same litter, but I don't know who got either of the other two. But I think one of them did look like Ring."

"Never seen him among your neighbors?"

Selma shook her head again.

Huber's eyes narrowed. "Huh! We've been figuring that the pack were farm dogs, mainly because we thought we recognized Ring as the leader. But if the Meadows brothers had a dog that was marked like Ring, I'd say it wasn't an accident that we've lost sheep."

"Do you mean that they would be low enough to ruin a good dog by training him to run down sheep?" Selma demanded.

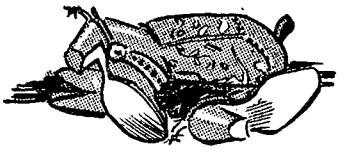
Huber nodded seriously. "It could be done. Not very hard, with a smart dog. But he'd never be good for anything again."

The girl said indignantly, "Anybody that low ought to be run over the edge of the mesa himself."

Huber nodded. "Begins to look like Meadows meant what he said. If I knew about the dog for certain, I'd be sure."

REASONABLE CONCLUSION

By LIMERICK LUKE



A cowman whose wife loved to chatter
Tried throwing his Sunday boots at her.
When she still wouldn't hush,
He just sighed: "Let her gush,
For after all what does it matter?"

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He rode off, and Selma stood watching him go. Maybe it was because he had been out of work, tired, and even hungry, that he had seemed such a horrible human being before; he had been quite pleasant today. And, clean shaven, he was not bad-looking.

When she finished the wash she changed to riding clothes and took a lunch down to her brothers, who were fixing fence along the river road. Coming back, she saw another rider coming toward her. She did not recognize him until he stopped his horse and sat there, staring at Ring, who, as usual, had accompanied her.

His identity startled her. "Lem Meadows!" she exclaimed. "What are you—I mean, we almost never see you down this way."

Meadows was still staring at the dog. "Is that dog yours?"

"Ring? Yes, he's mine."

Something about the sight of the dog was obviously disturbing the man. "Yours, huh? What's your price on him?"

"But I don't want to sell him," Selma said hurriedly. "I've turned down other offers."

Meadows's manner was surly. "Maybe nobody has made you a really good price. I know he's a good dog and I'll pay good money for him."

"Why, you've never seen him work," Selma exclaimed. "How could you know anything about him?"

Meadows was still watching the dog, and answered absently. "Got a dog from the same litter, must have been. Extra smart, and this one will be too. Smart enough to—"

He stopped short and his face was ugly as he looked at her.

Selma said carefully. "I'm sorry. I don't want to sell Ring."

He did not like that. He cajoled and argued for a while, and when he finally rode on he was in an ugly temper.

Selma hurried home, but she stayed only long enough to tell her mother that she was going to visit her uncle, and then headed for the dangerous trail up to the top of the mesa.

BECAUSE she was afraid of the trail, it cheered Selma a little to see the tracks that Huber's horse had left. But in many places she walked and led her pony, turning her face away from the dizzying drop along the narrow ledges. Ring trotted along behind, whining now and then.

It was past midafternoon when she reached Huber's camp and saw her uncle at the wagon, while the flocks grazed on the slight slope beyond.

The girl explained hurriedly. "I ran into Lem Meadows this morning. He tried to buy Ring, and let it slip that he owned the dog that was marked like him."

"Did he, now?" the old man said. "Then ten to one he figured he could train Ring to take the place of the one that Huber shot. Guess we better go out and talk to Huber. He and I were just talking over this very thing."

While riding up to the sheep, the old man praised Huber more than was usual with him. "Smart young feller. Got a head on his shoulders and knows how to use it. I still say that it wasn't such a bad notion, my running that advertisement. You could go further and do worse, Selmy."

"If I remember, Allen Huber was the one man out of the bunch who didn't know anything about it, and didn't want anything to do with it," Selma retorted tartly. "I can respect him for that, at least."

Huber came to meet them, and listened intently as Selma told him of Lem Meadows's call, but his first thought did not seem to be of the sheep. "You shouldn't have tried that trail," he said sharply. "It's a bad one. And you can't go back in the dark. You'll have to stay at the camp with your uncle till morning."

Selma shuddered a little, thinking about climbing down the narrow ledges in the dark, with the long fall below. "All right," she said. "But Meadows is without a lead dog now. Do you think he'll give up?"

Huber grinned a little and Sim Buckley exclaimed, "Give up? Not them! Especially not Lem. He's got a private grudge to satisfy."

Huber looked back at the quietly grazing sheep. "I'd say we might as well figure

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that they'll try to run the whole flock over the mesa rim," he said calmly. "It's what I'd try if I were in their boots. And tonight is as likely as any time. Lem Meadows isn't a man to delay over paying off a grudge."

Sim Buckley growled, "Then tonight's the night we shoot any dog that moves."

"No," Huber snapped. "Tonight's the night we try to get at the men who are setting the dogs on. We'll move the sheep over into that wash that runs toward the edge of the mesa, and make camp there."

The old man protested. "Hold on a minute. That's playing right into their hands. That wash isn't too far from the rim of the mesa. If the men or those hounds of theirs manage to slip by us and get into the sheep, we might not be able to stop them in time."

"That's why I want to move them," Huber told him coolly. "I want them to think this is the chance they want. You can't trap a coyote without putting out bait."

"A whole flock of sheep is what I'd call expensive bait," the old man growled. But he gave in. "Still, I guess you and I can handle that Meadows outfit. It's getting late. We'd better go about it. Selmy, I'll hitch the team to the wagon and you can drive it over."

IT WAS sundown before the sheep were bedded down in the shallow rimmed wash, which ended in a sheer drop a hundred feet further down.

Selma, who enjoyed cooking over a camp fire, had coffee boiling and biscuits baking in the Dutch oven when the men came in for supper.

Huber said appreciatively, "Smells good. Nice not to have to get your own meal."

The old man chuckled. "Haw! Maybe you'll get around to admitting that I didn't have such a bad idea after all, in that adver—"

Huber yelled at him with what Selma thought was unnecessary violence. "Any man who marries for reasons like that deserves what he gets."

Selma said sweetly, "Any woman either. I'm so glad we agree."

He glared at her over his cup of coffee, then sat scowling at the fire until the meal was over. Then the men discussed their plans for the night.

"If I were sure they'd come right down the wash, we'd find cover there, above the sheep, and give them a hot welcome," Huber said. "But they could come down from either side. We'd better flank the sheep, one to each side."

"It's going to be a dark night," the old man grumbled. "That worries me."

"It's the kind of a night they'd pick," Huber retorted briefly. He looked at Ring, lying beside Selma. "Can you send that dog down the wash for, say, half a mile, to wait there and turn the sheep back, just in case they get away from us?"

Selma said, "He will if I go with him."

Huber said shortly, "I don't want you getting mixed up in a fight."

"Who says I'm going to?" Selma asked. "I'll be too far down the wash to have anything to do with it. I'll just help Ring turn back the sheep if they come."

RANCH FLICKER TALK

Movie News Roundup by
ROBERT CUMMINGS *Next Issue!*

A Review of Universal International's
DESTRY
featuring
AUDIE MURPHY and MARI BLANCHARD

Plus a Word-and-Picture Personality Sketch of
DANA ANDREWS

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Her uncle agreed. "Doesn't seem like there's much danger to her, Allen. And I'd be easier in my mind if she and the dog were there."

Huber seemed about to object again, then shrugged. "All right then. Let the fire die down, in case we're being watched, and we'll hunt our positions."

The night was dark as Selma dismounted near a small bush-covered mound well below the camp, and settled down beside the dog to wait. An hour or two passed slowly. Nothing happened, and the girl grew sleepy.

It was the sharp crack of a rifle report that woke her—that and the growling of the dog beside her. She sat up with a start. She heard two or three more shots, then yells, dogs barking, the bleating of frightened sheep.

The shots and yells fell away but the savage barking and growling, the frightened bleating of sheep, and the clatter of many running feet grew louder and came toward her. The pack of dogs was among the sheep.

She let go of Ring's collar and cried, "Turn them, boy. Turn them back."

THE eager dog darted away. The girl ran to her pony. She must try to help turn the terrified animals from their wild run down the wash which ended at the mesa rim, or at least break up the flock into smaller bands so that not so many would be lost. And she was afraid for her dog. He would fight the marauders and try to drive them off.

She could not see the sheep in the darkness, but by the sounds she knew they must be close. Then all at once they were almost on top of her, a grayish-white, blurred, moving mass, sweeping forward.

She heard Ring's furious barking somewhere close by, and swung her pony to run alongside and ahead of the flock. Shouting, she swung her quirt blindly at every bounding form she could reach.

The bewildered sheep began to scatter, break up into small bands, and spread out.

Off to one side then, she heard Ring's barking change to the snarling and growling of a dog fight, and she turned the pony in that direction, urging him to top speed.

She came on the pack of fighting dogs. Ring was out of sight at the bottom of the heap; but by his cries she knew he was fighting for his life and getting the worst of it.

She leaned down from the saddle and struck at the dogs on top with her quirt, lashing them with all her strength.

One, a huge hound, wheeled and slashed at her pony's legs. The pony reared, and then the hound sprang at her, slant eyes gleaming in the dark and long fangs wickedly reaching for her.

Selma screamed, lashed at the hound's face with her quirt, and struck again.

She heard a man's shout close at hand. There was a shot, close by, the hound crumpled, but she felt tearing fangs slash at her arm before it fell.

Allen Huber dismounted beside her. He had the neck yoke in his hands and he swung it like a club. The pack of dogs fled, howling. Ring staggered to his feet, panting and trying to wag his tail.

Selma cried, "I don't believe he's even badly hurt. I was afraid he'd be killed."

"You crazy little fool," Huber said angrily. "That hound was a killer."

Selma shuddered, looking at the motionless hound. She was suddenly scared and shaking. "He did look awful. But I couldn't let them kill Ring—he's a good dog."

"He's a good dog, all right," Huber agreed. "You've kept your uncle from losing his flock. We stopped the Meadows brothers—Lem's hurt pretty bad—but the dogs got away from us. In fact," he added, loudly, "he's almost a good enough dog so a man might consider marrying just to get him, seeing you won't sell him."

Selma was about to tell him that a man who would marry for such a reason was no wiser than one who would answer an advertisement, but she decided it could wait for a while. It was too pleasant to have a solid shoulder to shiver against to risk a quarrel just then.

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RANGE

by LLOYD KEVIN

ELAINE DIDN'T CARE whether Grove was rich or poor . . . but she wasn't going to let him be cheated. . . .

ELAINE FORBUSH had that rare quality of beauty that caused men to square their tired shoulders and to raise their hats with a shade more formality than they had intended.

Elaine stood taller than average, with a slim and pliant grace, and she wore her straight black hair combed back in Spanish style after the fashion of her great-grandmother. Her oval face was even-featured and genteel, with clear blue eyes that contrasted strangely with the hint of olive in her firm, smooth skin.

On any ordinary morning the doings of the ranch and the news from Peridot, the one-street cowtown in the center of the valley, touched Elaine but lightly as she went about her quiet household chores. But today was Thursday, the day the *Peridot Press* came out, and neighbor Chris Alberg had left the newspaper on the Forbush porch.

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Elaine stooped to pick it up, and her eyes swept the headlines. The cut-glass bowl she'd been drying slipped to the floor and shattered to a hundred pieces. For the first time in her busy ranch life, Elaine ignored broken glass. She walked blindly through the glittering shards to spread the newspaper on the dining table.

"GROVE DAMERON NEW OWNER OF THE BAR V," the bold letters spelled. "Dameron inherits north end of Castle Valley from deceased uncle."

The life-size picture of Grove Dameron floated before her moist eyes, clear and pulsingly real—tall, blue-eyed Grove, with his brown hair sun-faded to a dusty sheen and his lean shoulders squared, Grove Dameron working his own dry hillside ranch outside the town of Thalia, his smooth brow beaded with tired sweat, his eyes proud with the achievement of his own two hands.

Elaine caught up the open paper. Her father would want to know. She hurried through the house and out the back screen door to find him, the newspaper crackling with every anxious step.

SHE had first met Grove Dameron at the Reganville fair, where she had gone with her father, Randolph Forbush. She had gazed at thick-wooled sheep and heavy-shouldered horses with only a mild interest. Then came the cattle—and young rancher Dameron. From that moment the fair had become the pivot point of her life.

Fortunately, Grove had developed his own strain of Hereford-Shorthorn beef stock that caught Randolph's interest enough that father and daughter could make the trip on to Thalia to be guests at the modest Dameron ranch. There they saw what one man alone, with courage and determination, could accomplish.

At the end of the week Elaine and Grove had parted, with a hurried kiss, a fervent handclasp, and an unspoken promise.

Now Grove Dameron would be living here in Castle Valley, owner of the big Bar V, the most important man around Peridot. Elaine drew a quivering breath that was almost a sob of panic in her throat.

Randolph Forbush came out of the stable leading a young roan with bridle and bronc saddle. The roan shied and reared and snorted at the flapping newspaper in Elaine's hands, but the rancher held the animal down with a steady grip. Randolph Forbush was a man of medium stature, straight as a post. His square-chinned features and neatly clipped, thick gray hair gave him a commanding air. He was the type of man nobody had ever tried to nickname "Randy."

Elaine handed him the paper without a word, and he read on down into the fine print.

"The Bar V," he remarked then. "Seven thousand acres of the best grazing land. All of North Castle Valley. I'm blamed glad for him. If ever a man deserved a windfall like that, it's Grove Dameron."

Two deep worry ridges appeared on Elaine's smooth brow. "But, Dad, he'll be expected to take his uncle, Dean Riker's, place in the valley—to be head of the Association, to lead the Fourth of July parades to speak at picnics. Dean Riker made all those public doings a part of the Bar V during his lifetime.

Randolph's gaze lengthened to the far rough horizon of the Scantlin Hills west of town, and he slowly shook his head. "I can't picture Grove becoming another Dean Riker."

"This means he'll have to give up his home place at Thalia, Elaine added, "and all he's worked for these past years."

"It's a puzzle to me," Randolph put in, "why Riker's no-account son, Deuce, didn't inherit the Bar V. Worthless gamblers and fourflushers like Deuce Riker are usually the very ones to step into a rich deal like that."

Elaine folded the newspaper. "If you'll hitch the sorrel mare to the buggy, Dad, I'll drive in to town and find out."

Another point bothered Elaine. She had Grove's last letter, written less than a week ago, and it did not mention the inheritance. Either it had come as a surprise to him, or he had been reluctant to accept the fact, maybe didn't want to speak of it. Elaine's frown deepened. If her guess proved true,

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Grove Dameron would have plenty of need for her help.

ELAINE hurried to the house and changed into her best dress, with its full skirt and fitted bodice, in a pale blue dimity that accented the clear azure of her eyes. The buggy was waiting at the front hitch-rail by the time she had tied a matching bonnet over her black hair. She looked at the clock and saw that it was not yet nine. Thank Heaven the day was still young!

The three miles of dusty road into Peridot seemed like thirty, in spite of the mare's lively pace, but at last the red buggy wheel hummed around the curve between the big Bull Durham signboard and the lumberyard and the sorrel mare whinnied at the bustle of activity on Main Street.

ELAINE

Elaine instinctively hauled in on the lines. The wide street, with its weathered board false fronts, was usually almost deserted in mid-morning; today it bustled with activity. A dozen people crisscrossed through the powdery dust. Wagons and buckboards lined the hitch-racks, harness jangling as horses stomped at pestering flies. A big flat-bed wagon had been dragged up alongside the stage depot, and a clerk with black sleeve guards tacked up colored bunting above it.

Elaine found an opening in front of the *Peridot Press*.

"What kind of a celebration is this, Mr. Kearn?" she called to the newspaperman, who was balanced on one of the ladders propped against the front of his shop. "Who's hoping to get elected?"

The short, bald-headed editor dropped the end of a paper banner he had been trying to tack to the grey boards. It unrolled as it fell, and Elaine could read: "WELCOME GROVE DAMERON"

"Good morning, Miss Forbush." Job Kearn turned, and attempted to execute a half-formal bow and descend the ladder at the same time. He trotted across the plank walk and into the dust by the buggy, his small eyes glittering. "Haven't you heard? The new owner of the Bar V is arriving on the stage today."

"I understood," Elaine countered coolly, "that Dean Riker had a son known as Deuce who would inherit his estate."

"Oh, that wastrel." Kearn shrugged his shoulders. "Dean cut him off without a cent. I saw the will myself—Dean had young lawyer Ash Conray make it out for him when he first took sick—a long while before he went over to Reganville to have old Doc Manning ease his last days."

"How," Elaine couldn't help asking, "did Grove Dameron get word of this? Did Mr. Conray make the trip to Thalia?" The contrast between Ash Conray and Grove Dameron made a startling picture in her mind. The lawyer, with his thin mustache trimmed to artistic perfection, his thick black hair smoothed above his ears into a ripple of wave at the back that almost touched his white collar, would put Grove on the defensive at the very first sight.

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The publisher of the *Peridot Press* nodded. "I'll let Ash tell you about it himself. Here he comes down the street now. If you'll excuse me, Miss Forbush, we've got a lot of fixing to do before the stage pulls in. Going to have a brass band and all the trimmings!" Job Kearn grinned and trotted back to his ladder.

Elaine bit her lips. The colored bunting had already been strung to the corners of the wagon by the stage depot.

SHE didn't look at Ash Conray until he stood in the dust by her buggy wheel, his black hat in his long thin hands.

"Good morning," she said then, in answer to his greeting. The sunlight in his yellow-brown eyes gave them a feline gleam. His dark coat and black string tie looked fresh from the tailor's.

"With all this excitement," he remarked, waving a careless hand toward the bustle of preparation, "I hope you haven't forgotten the dance at the new school house this Saturday night."

Elaine brought her mind to the subject with an effort. "I didn't know the school house was near enough completed."

"The floor's finished and the roof is nearly done. What more could we need for a dance? I would like the pleasure of your company, Elaine."

"Oh, I'm sorry," Elaine said quickly. "I've already been asked. I'm going with—with Grove Dameron."

The lawyer's eyes glittered flatly for a moment. Then he bowed in stiff formality. "I concede," he stated. "Who am I to compete with seven thousand acres."

Elaine felt a quick flush of color mounting to her cheeks. She yanked on the lines and backed the little sorrel mare out away from the hitch-rack, narrowly missing a wagon wheel with her buggy hub as she swung into the street. She didn't look back. Let Ash Conray stand there in the swirl of her dust!

She drove the length of Main Street, letting the breeze cool her face, then turned back. From both sides of the street came the hurry of preparation. She couldn't let Grove ride into this unprepared.

Elaine headed the sorrel mare out on the road to Reganville. At the bridge beyond the edge of town she found little barefoot Joey, the blacksmith's son, baiting crawfish in the creek. With the promise of a whole fresh-baked apple pie, she got him to come along to bring the buggy back to Peridot.

They met the four-horse outfit in a deep pass in the Scantlin Hills three miles from town, and Elaine handed the reins over to Joey while she flagged down the stage. Grove Dameron himself jumped down to meet her. He dropped his hat into the dust to take her in his arms. Then a wave of shyness caught up with him, under the curious eyes of the driver and a derby-hatted drummer inside the coach. His neck reddening, he stumbled back to retrieve his hat.

The drummer stepped down. "Reckon I'll ride top-side," he remarked, winking broadly. "You two'll want some privacy." He climbed up beside the driver.

Grove helped Elaine into the coach and bounded in beside her. He pulled the door shut as the vehicle lurched into motion.

"Elaine," he whispered hoarsely, "you don't know how glad I am to see you!" He gripped both her hands until she winced with pain.

"I had to be first to congratulate you, Grove," Elaine explained breathlessly.

Grove's blue eyes sobered. "I'm not sure yet if I'm lucky or not."

"Oh, you *are*, Grove. You're most wonderfully fortunate."

Grove shook his head. "You may think I'm plumb locoed, but when the time came to sign my Thalia ranch over to the new owner, I came near backing out of the whole deal."

Elaine felt the moisture welling into her eyes. "I understand, Grove. You had built up a fine little ranch all by yourself. You had plenty to be proud of. But with seven thousand—with all the land and cattle under the Bar V, think of how much more good you can do."

GROVE hesitated, his brow furrowed. "I hardly knew my uncle, Dean Riker," he said, "but I heard how

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"I forgot myself," Grove said, "I was so glad to see you"

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he rode over everybody to build up that cattle empire of his under the Bar V iron. At one time Dean Riker had more enemies than Custer had scouts."

"But all that changed in later years, Grove. Dean Riker became the most influential man in Castle Valley, a leader in all the public affairs at Peridot."

"An orator, I hear—a kind of politician."

"Yes, he was building a name in politics. As he got older people began to look up to him."

Grove made a grimace of disgust. "Because of his money. And I'm supposed to step into *his* shoes!" The young rancher turned to stare out the window at the dusty hills sliding past, rebellion darkening his eyes. "Do you really think I'm lucky?" Then he added. "At least now I can afford to ask you to marry me." Bright spots of color began to grow in his cheeks.

Elaine caught her breath, her heart jumping. "If this is a proposal, I resent the insinuation that I want you to take over the Bar V so I can marry you for your money."

Grove's jaw dropped. "Elaine, I didn't mean that. You know I've been counting the days until I could get enough money ahead—"

"How would I know?" Elaine let her temper flare. "Your letters were about as romantic as the label on a can of baked beans! How could I know that you even remembered me?" She was being unfair, she knew. His letters *had* been reserved, almost cool, but always through the crude and commonplace words of his pen had shone plainly the quiet message of hope and understanding, the same lovable shyness that was an inherent part of him.

Her conscience rebelled at the hurt she was inflicting, but for his own sake she couldn't let him go on feeling sorry for himself. "I made *my* mistake," she declared, "ever coming out here to meet you!"

Grove's face paled to an adobe gray under the tan. "I realize I'm only an ignorant dry-land cowpoke," he stated coldly. "I'm no match for that slick Ash Conray, who claims to know you mighty well. He's probably got plenty of fancy words."

Elaine winced, and quick pain tightened her throat. "Grove," she cried, clutching both his hands, "I didn't mean it that way at all! Ash Conray isn't even worthy of shining your boots."

"The one good point of this inheritance," Grove persisted, "is that it'll help me better myself so you won't be ashamed of me."

"Please, Grove! I've always been *proud* of you! Always!" Elaine bit her lip, trying to keep back the tears. Everything was turning out wrong. Instead of bolstering his ego against the trials of the public welcome ahead, she had only hurt him. And the stage was already out of the hills, rolling across the dusty flat, with the weathered, angular shapes of the town's buildings looming ever closer. In a moment she would see the colored bunting.

"Grove," she said, "I wanted to warn you." She looked up into the shadowed blue of his eyes. "The people of Peridot are planning a big welcome, brass band and speeches and all."

Grove's face paled and the muscles tightened along his lean jaw, but the dark rebellion, the frantic, hunted look, had gone from his eyes. Elaine caught a thankful breath. Maybe her challenging words had been worth the pain they had brought!

"I'd like to be with you," she said, "when you meet the crowd."

Grove had been staring rigidly ahead. He swung quickly to meet her look. "Just let anybody try to separate us!"

THE music of the brass band reached out over the dry air to meet them, loud and blaring and off key. The horses shied and plunged against each other, and the stage rocked drunkenly. The driver's lurid cursing almost drowned out the music.

Then they rolled between the high false fronts and the echoes rattled together like empty cans in a basket—hoofs, wheels, and shouts, and a cornet and trombone competing wildly for top noise on the flat-wagon bandstand.

The men in the band, Elaine noticed, were all local men, with tarnished brass instruments dragged out of attic and trunk. They were doing their loud best to make an old army march sound like a welcome.

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The coach swayed to a stop as close to the depot as the crowd would permit, and Elaine looked out over the joggling field of hats and upturned faces. For the first time her courage left her and she felt a hollow, twisting fear. This was more than she had bargained for. Everybody in Castle Valley must have driven in to town, and brought a wagonload of friends besides.

The dust from hundreds of boots sifted up into the sunlit air until brown faces swam in the haze of it. The biting taste of alkali mingled with the smells of sweating horses and stale whiskey, making Elaine teeter on the verge of nausea. The chorus of yelling voices grew like the roll of thunder in a summer storm. The spooked stage horses plunged ahead and dragged the coach, locked wheels grinding, for another ten feet, while Elaine gripped the door frame in white-knuckled tension.

It was the firm touch of Grove's hand that steadied her. She swallowed hastily and looked around into his serious face—and once again she was Elaine Forbush, daughter of Randolph Forbush of the Bradded N. In spite of all its mortgages and rocky grazing it was almost as important in the south of Castle Valley as the Bar V was in the north. She had come to help Grove, to steady *him!*

Elaine smiled, gripped his strong arm, and faced the crowd.

A heavy voice shouted, "Grove Dameron," and the people took it up. Under the surge of human sounds, the band faded out and quit, and there was only the husky roar.

Grove stepped down and gave Elaine a helping hand. Sweating townsmen pushed forward. They might have hoisted Grove on their shoulders like a homecoming hero to parade the street—she could read the suggestion in their excited faces—but the quiet prestige that had always belonged to Elaine Forbush kept them back. Men elbowed open a narrow path to the platform of the stage depot, where Job Kearn of the *Peridot Press* waited to read a flowery, poetic speech.

Elaine gave no thought to the editor's eloquence. She was watching Grove's tense face and the crafty light in Ash Conray's amber eyes as he waited near the newspaperman's elbow. This was only the beginning of the ordeal for Grove Dameron!

Job Kearn wound up his oration with a flourish, and there was a wild burst of applause from the crowd. Then came a new cry: "Speech! Speech! Let's hear from Grove Dameron! Come on, Bar V!"

GROVE'S face looked frozen. He stared glassy-eyed at the uptilted faces. Then he cleared his throat.

"Friends and neighbors—" His voice was a husky croak.

"Louder!" a cowhand yelled. "Speak up, man!"

"I'll try," Grove continued in a louder voice, "to make the Bar V a credit to Castle Valley. I'm a stranger here, but—"

Swelling cheers from the crowd drowned his words.

"For a stranger," Ash Conray hissed, not smiling, "you're taking over plenty fast." He glanced significantly at Elaine.

Grove's jaw set, and Elaine felt the cords of his arm grow tight as he clenched his fist. She moved to edge in front of him, but Pete Lacy and Sam Horn, ranchers from southeast town, had shouldered in.

"Come on, neighbor," Pete said, "I'm buying you a drink at the Painted Owl. It's time we all got acquainted." He raised his hat to Elaine. "With your permission, Miss Elaine. A man can stomach only about so much of this highfaluting pretty talk." Pete jerked his head in the direction of the red-faced editor.

Elaine smiled quickly. She had known Pete Lacy since he worked for the Bradded N six years ago, before he left to bring a young wife from the East and start his own ranch.

"As your guest, Pete," she declared, "Grove Dameron is in good hands." She turned for a parting word with Grove, and suddenly she remembered the dance at the school house.

"Grove," Elaine whispered, "the dance—Saturday night. Forgive me, Grove, but I told Ash Conray you were taking me."

Grove Dameron's blue eyes glittered like deep-frozen ice. "I'll call for you."

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Then he was gone, swept away with the crowd. Elaine found herself trembling like a reed in a flood current. The handkerchief in her hand, she discovered, was ripped to a hundred ragged, linty ribbons. Bracing a hand against the building wall, she started slowly through the dust to find her own little mare and buggy.

The following afternoon the blacksmith's son rode a borrowed pony to the Bradded N to collect his apple pie reward.

Elaine seated him on the shady porch step with knife and fork and pitcher of milk and placed the tin, bulging with sugar-sparkling crusted pie, upon his knees.

"Has Grove Dameron been back in town," she asked carefully, "since the big celebration yesterday?"

Little Joey shook his head, and swallowed a big chunk of pie. "Nope," he replied, "but Pop says that, from what he hears, Dameron is straightening out that Bar V tangle like a man who sure knows his cattle business."

Elaine's pulse quickened, and she caught herself humming a bit of the strident tune that yesterday's brass band had hammered out. The worst had passed. Let Grove get caught up in the challenging problems of the big, spreading Bar V outfit, and he'd soon make it as much his own as the little ranch on the dry hillside beyond Thalia had been. With his ability and determination Grove would be quick to grow to match his new responsibilities.

And he had already mentioned marriage. Elaine felt a warm flush creeping up around her ears. If only she had answered him differently!

SATURDAY came, another hot, dry day, but with an ominous stillness in the atmosphere and a bank of thunderheads piling up above the Scantlin Hills to the west. But even the storm threat in the weather failed to dim Elaine's spirits. Tonight would be like the time she had spent on the little dry ranch at Thalia!

Elaine worked through the sultry, darkening afternoon at last-minute washing and pressing. Everything had to be perfect.

When Grove Dameron arrived in the dusky, cloud-shadowed twilight, he was driving Dean Riker's favorite team of bays hitched to Riker's new yellow-wheeled buggy. For an instant Elaine felt a chill clutch her heart. It was almost as though Riker himself had driven up to the Bradded N ranch house, instead of Grove.

But at Grove's call of greeting the spell was broken, and Elaine hurried to meet him. Grove caught her hand warmly in his, and helped her up over the yellow-painted step and under the shiny patent-leather buggy top.

Grove wore a new dark suit and a cream-colored Stetson. "All I could find at the Peridot Mercantile," he explained. "I never expected to be going dancing so soon in Castle Valley."

Elaine laughed. "It's your social obligation, part of being owner of the big Bar V."

The instant she had spoken she realized her mistake. Grove's jaw set and an icy look came into his eyes.

"There seems to be plenty of obligation," he declared, "connected with the Bar V!" He urged the team to a fast trot with a flick of the lines, and they rolled along in silence.

Rigs of all sizes were gathered at the temporary hitch-rail in front of the unfinished schoolhouse, as Grove and Elaine drove up. Elaine spoke to a dozen different friends and neighbors as she and Grove pushed through into the open-sided building, but she made no attempt to stop and visit, to include Grove in any conversation. What was the use? Dark clouds of discouragement smothered her spirit as thoroughly as though the actual thunderstorm had already broken from the sky.

The twang of a banjo and the creak of a fiddle came from the closed end of the building, and several couples waltzed through the uneven piles of fresh wax that little Joey spilled from a box onto the new boards. Grove tossed his Stetson on a bench and bowed in formal request to Elaine.

In spite of herself, Elaine felt her heart pounding faster as Grove's lean, strong arms guided her out across the floor to the three-four throb of the banjo. This was a moment she had dreamed of. She tried to relax, to let the music take hold.

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By the fourth or fifth dance she had almost forgotten her earlier disappointment. Grove had let the tension ease out of his face, and he smiled to one neighbor and another as they passed.

Then Ash Conray cut in. He was dressed, as usual, in spotless dark coat and trousers. Even the knot of his black string tie held its perfect shape.

"May I?" he asked politely, amber eyes glittering in the light from the swinging lanterns. "It's unfair for one man to have seven thousand acres of land and monopolize the prettiest girl in town besides." He showed white teeth in a grin.

Grove stiffened, fists clenching. "Step outside with me and say that," he challenged.

Conray bowed, his grin gone. "Any time, dogieman!"

"Grove!" Elaine gripped the young rancher's arms until her fingers bit into the hard muscle. "Forget it, Grove! It's all in fun."

"Nothing that flat-heeler says is ever in fun." Grove shrugged off her grip. "Go on and dance with the prettied-up fourflusher." He spun on his heel and stalked away.

ELAINE took a step after him, his name on the tip of her tongue. Then she bit her lips and turned back. People were beginning to stare. Ash Conray was waiting politely, smiling his cool smile.

"Your friend seems easily upset," he remarked quietly.

The lights had begun to blur before Elaine's moist eyes. "Please take me to my seat," she begged. "I'm sorry."

The music stopped as they reached the benches. Elaine ducked away as quickly as she could with reasonable courtesy, but all the couples were drifting to the seats and she was hemmed in. Eyes swimming, she pushed past them, searching the crowd. There was no sign of Grove Dameron.

She spotted Pete Lacy and his young wife at the end of the hall and hurried toward them, but they, too, had disappeared by the time she reached the place. There was only Sam Horn alone in the corner. Then the fiddles started up again, and Sam swung a pretty red-head out onto the dance floor.

Elaine shrank against the wall, trying to avoid the interested male glances. She *couldn't* dance with anyone now. She *had* to find Grove!

The music was throbbing in full swing when the first urgent whisper ran through the hall. Elaine heard it, and her heart contracted in a spasm of pain. She knew the meaning even before she heard the word: "Fight!"

Like magic the hall cleared. The fiddles squeaked out to nothing. People rushed for doors and open walls of the unfinished building.

Elaine found herself running, climbing over benches, a prayer on her lips. And suddenly there they were, Grove Dameron and Ash Conray, squared off in the open space beside the schoolhouse in a pool of yellow light from the high lanterns. Elaine teetered on a bench and gripped the open studding. Her frantic cry was lost in the rushing babble of voices, in the savage animal sounds of the fight.

Both men had their coats off. Grove's new shirt was already half torn away, and blood smeared his chin and chest. The sight sent a shudder of pain through Elaine.

Grove sprang at the lawyer, and his fist smashed into the man's mouth, splitting his lip over his white teeth. Blood spurted. Elaine felt a wild touch of elation through the nausea that threatened her. Ash Conray had been asking for this fight from the moment Grove came to Peridot!

But the lawyer showed unexpected skill at boxing. He hooked a left into Grove's head that laid open his cheek, and swung a right that left a long gash over one eye. Then he thrust his left in Grove's face, punching, chopping, blinding. All the while he kept up his own guard, protecting his already swollen mouth.

Every time Grove threw a punch he ran into Conray's hard knuckles, until Grove's face looked as if he'd stumbled into a barbed-wire fence. Elaine could only grip the two-by-four studding and pray. Grove *had* to win. He couldn't fail before all these people, who welcomed him to Peridot.

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WILD rage seized Grove and he swung blindly, recklessly. The lawyer landed a right to the chin that staggered Grove across the yard. Grove dropped to one knee and threw up his arms to protect his face from more of the merciless beating. He was about finished. Elaine felt choked with the swelling in her throat.

But in his momentary weakness Grove found a new strategy. He resorted to the lawyer's tight defense, protecting himself while his sight cleared and his senses steadied. He reeled to his feet, backing away from Conray's fury.

It was the lawyer's turn to lose his self control, to plunge in wildly and try to finish his man. Grove let him come, parrying the blows while his own strength returned. When Conray's fists began to lose their paralyzing sting and his wild burst of speed slowed, Grove dropped his guard, deliberately baiting the man on. He'd found Conray's style. Now he'd set him up for the finish.

But the lawyer wouldn't be baited. He stumbled close and locked Grove in a clinch, then brought up a hard knee into the groin that drove a gasp of agonized pain from Grove's lips. Grove stumbled and fell, and the two men rolled in the dirt, while a growl of sympathy rose from the straining crowd.

Tears streamed down Elaine's cheeks as she stared through the dust at the writhing forms on the ground. Abruptly the men were on their feet again. Grove reeled groggily, but the bitter determination was still there, plain in every line of his battered face. He ducked Conray's left and swung an arcing right to the lawyer's cheekbone that cracked loud above the rumble of the spectators.

Staggering forward on wide-spread legs, Grove slammed home another right and left. Conray went down. Grove waited, panting loudly for breath. The lawyer came up again, swinging. Grove hit him with all his remaining strength, and Ash Conray sprawled back into the dirt. There he lay, unmoving.

A great sigh of accomplishment came from the crowd, and there was a rustle of shifting feet. Grove shook his head and staggered away into the enveloping darkness. Elaine jumped down through the unfinished wall, ignoring a long, ragged tear in her good skirt, forgetting the crowd and a hundred judging eyes, and ran after Grove, sobbing his name.

She caught him, bloody and disheveled, reeling blindly toward the buggy, and led him back to the new cast-iron pump in the yard behind the schoolhouse. She worked the creaking handle while he bathed his face and head in the gush of cold water from the iron spout. She used a ragged section torn from her petticoat as a towel to blot away the darkening blood.

"I'll take you home now," she said quietly.

Grove shook his head. "I'll see *you* home."

Elaine took his arm and they started for the buggy. At every other step one neighbor or another made a point of moving closer to inquire how Grove felt, or to express their personal sympathy and interest or mutter a word of praise. Elaine answered for him, thanking each one.

"Sheep dip!" Grove gritted, when they were alone at the buggy. "More flattery for the Big Bar V."

Elaine bit her lips. "They're you're friends, Grove."

Grove shook his head, his eyes bleak with self-condemnation. "Instead of licking my boots, they should run me out of town for what I did, breaking up the dance with a fist-fight."

THEY drove in tight silence to the Bradded N, and Elaine jumped out of the buggy before Grove had a chance to help her.

She waved a quick good-by and ran into the house. But not until she stood in her own room and had lighted the lamp and looked down at the dress she had worn especially for this evening, the skirt that had been crisp and bright now ripped and smudged, did the hot tears come. She threw herself on the bed, wracked with sobs, and the whole world tumbling down about her shoulders couldn't have brought more pain.

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In the following weeks no word came from the Bar V. On the main street of Peridot, Elaine Forbush was treated with the same polite and friendly respect she had always known. Men seemed pleased to answer her careful inquiries about Grove Dameron, but there was little they could tell. He was staying away from town.

Little Joey gave the most help. "Pop says," he reported, "that feller Dameron is sure a worker. He'll lift the mortgages off the Bar V if anybody can."

Mortgages! Elaine had never thought of Dean Riker and the Bar V as ever knowing the shortage of cash that plagued all of the other Castle Valley ranchers. She spoke to her father about the subject that night.

"I reckon the Bar V had its share of ups and downs like the rest." Randolph Forbush agreed. "It would take a deal of spending money to keep Dean Riker in the style he liked, not to mention the doctor bills he must have had toward the last."

Not satisfied, Elaine called on Will Mannion at the Peridot Bank on her next trip to town. The banker shook his graying head.

"I can't give out the figures on the amount of indebtedness. Let's just say that Dean Riker had reached his limit."

Elaine left the bank with a bitter tightness in her throat. Instead of a fortune in land and cattle, Grove had inherited Dean Riker's left-over headaches!

Little wonder he had been reluctant over the whole deal, and Ash Conray's remarks had bitten extra deep. The sunlight blurred in Elaine's eyes. Maybe she had been too quick, too critical in her judgment of Grove Dameron. If she had realized, maybe she could have been more help to him.

The following day Elaine persuaded her father to take her on a visit to the Bar V. The big ranch house sat in a green hollow between folded hills to the north of town, with rows of popular trees rustling in the westerly breeze. Corrals and stables clustered at the other end of the hollow, with bunkhouses in the lee of the hill between. It was cattle-raising business on the grand scale, with living to match.

But Grove Dameron was away with a crew of men, rounding up strays along the Craw River and the badlands to the east. None of the hands could say when he would be back.

IN THE days that followed, Elaine used every excuse to drive to Peridot. But there was no news. Even Ash Conray, the lawyer, had dropped out of sight. He was away on business at Reganville, the newspaperman told her.

Then one day Elaine saw Deuce Riker on the street. A chill of apprehension shook her until she could scarcely hold the lines to guide the little sorrel mare. Deuce had inherited a trace of Dean Riker's dominating appearance, to which he had added his own swaggering manner. He had his father's square face and high cheekbones, but a weak, receding chin that hid in his brilliant silk neckerchief. He wore a cartridge belt and heavy six-shooter with carved ivory grips. Elaine uttered a prayer of thanks that she could get out of town without meeting him face to face.

Randolph's brow furrowed when he heard the news. "Deuce Riker has built himself quite a reputation on the wrong side of the law," he remarked. "Let's hope he's only passing through town and didn't bring any of his hardcase cronies with him."

The next day was Thursday. Again Chris Alberg dropped the *Peridot Press* on the Forbush porch. Elaine picked it up, and her knees buckled under her. She read the glaring headlines through tears, while her heart contracted in aching desolation.

"NEW OWNER FOR THE BAR V" the big letters spelled. "LATE WILL DISCOVERED—SON GETS ENTIRE DEAN RIKER ESTATE."

The front page carried a brief story about Dean Riker's illness and death at Reganville, and gave full credit to lawyer Ash Conray for discovering the missing document that restored the Bar V to the direct descendent of the Riker family.

"We extend our heartiest welcome," Job Kearn had written editorially, "to the new and rightful owner of the Bar V. May he find our fair city and delightful Castle Valley a perfect home."

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He had printed below the very same welcoming speech that he had read to Grove Dameron on that crowded day in Peridot.

Elaine threw the paper from her, and quick anger set her blood pounding. There was not a word here about Grove, nothing about his claim to the Bar V and the work he'd done to put the big outfit in order. Maybe he'd been nearer right in his criticism than she had wanted to admit. Job Kearn, for one, saved his high-sounding praise for the man in power.

Afraid to trust herself, with the tears so near the surface, Elaine had her father send the new hired hand to find Grove and invite him to the Bradded N. The man rode out at once and returned late in the evening. Grove Dameron had already gone from the ranch. The new owner and his snake-eyed foreman had no knowledge of Dameron's whereabouts.

Randolph sent the man out again with instructions to stay with the chore until he located Grove, or not bother to come back. The hired hand returned the following noon.

"Found him," he reported. "He's bunking with old Hank Wallock, that sharp-tempered old nester over in the Scantlin Hills."

Elaine wasted no time hitching the little mare to the buggy. Randolph objected. "You're not going alone. Old Wallock is a plenty tough customer."

Elaine met her father's eyes in a level look. "I'm going to see Grove if I have to come back for my shotgun!"

SHE had no trouble finding the cut-off from the main road. It had been pointed out to her several times before. In a short time the red buggy wheels were rattling up over the weed-grown trail to Wallock's barbed-wire-fenced homestead between the rough, rocky jackpine-timbered hills.

Hank Wallock himself met her at the gate, with a pitchfork in his hand.

"Where you think *you're* going?" hs asked, his pale blue eyes sharp.

"I've been told that Grove Dameron is here."

Wallock stared a moment. "You're Elaine Forbush, ain't you?" He grinned suddenly. "You'll find the boy out back of the shack splitting some firewood for next winter. Better hurry along in before he takes to the hills. He's kinda shy about company."

Grove started at sight of the buggy as Elaine drove past the cabin. Then he slammed his ax into the chopping block, wiped his sweating brow, and grinned.

Elaine's heart leaped. Never, she was sure, had she loved him as much as at that moment! She pulled the mare to a stop, jumped from the buggy, and ran to him, and he caught her in his arms. Her pulse beat a crazy rhythm in her ears as their lips met. She closed her eyes and floated, whisper-light as cottonwood down, on her own pink cloud of ecstasy.

Then Grove's shy self-consciousness caught up with him again, and he let her go and stepped back, his cheeks coloring.

"I forgot myself," he said. "I was so glad to see you. But I'm only a down-and-out drifter now—a saddle-bum." A cloud passed over his blue eyes.

"Enough of that!" Elaine cut in, her gaze clinging to him as he stood there hatless and husky, sleeves rolled above the elbows, muscular arms tanned. "I want you to know, Grove Dameron, that at least *I* love you for yourself—and not for the Bar V."

Grove grinned crookedly. "Guess I never should have taken the inheritance in the first place."

"Grove—" Elaine dropped her voice. "I can't begin to tell you how sorry I am. But you have lots of friends here in the valley."

"Friends? Now that I'm set afoot? No longer the big Bar V?" The bitterness was back in his eyes.

Elaine hurried to change the subject. "Is there any chance that you can get your Thalia ranch back?

Grove shook his head. "The new owner would shoot me before he'd give it up."

"But the money from that ranch ought to help you start over."

The muscles of Grove's jaw tightened. "There was the matter of attorney's fees.

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When I took the inheritance I had to pay that fancy double-tongued lawyer, Ash Conray, every penny I got for my outfit at Thalia and more besides. And now that he's bled me white he finds another pigeon."

Elaine caught her breath. This picture of Ash Conray explained the hot blood between the two men. "Isn't there some way we can contest the new will?" she asked quickly.

"Hardly a chance, even if I had the money—which I haven't."

"But you were making a real showing on the Bar V."

FOR an instant Grove's eyes lighted with the same pride of accomplishment that she had seen when he worked his efficient little ranch on the hillside at Thalia. Then the bitterness took over.

"Forget the Bar V," he growled. "And you'd better forget me."

"Grove!" Elaine caught both his hands. "Come on over to the Bradded N. There's a job waiting for you."

Grove shook his head, his jaw set. "Afraid I can't."

"At least come to dinner. We'll expect you."

Grove turned to stare at the rocky hill. "I'll try," he agreed half-heartedly. "But we're pretty busy here."

Elaine started for her buggy. "Then I'll be looking for you."

Grove nodded and picked up his ax, and she knew he'd never come. This would be their parting, their last good-by—and yet there was nothing more she could say. She could only step into the buggy, turn the little mare around, and drive away.

Hank Wallock held the gate open, but he motioned for her to stop. "You're going to fight for him, aren't you?" he asked.

Elaine started as though he had read her mind. She nodded.

A bright gleam came into the old homesteader's eyes. "If there's anything I can do to help, just holler. I haven't known Grove as long as you have, but I have him sized up for one square hombre.",

Elaine drove down the rocky trail with quickened pulse. Grove had one more friend he could count on! But she had already made up her mind, even when she left Grove at his chopping block, and now with each passing mile her determination grew.

She drove straight to Peridot and pulled up in front of the newspaper office. Job Kearn was not in sight at his cluttered desk, but the clicking of hand-set type came from beyond the ink-smudged partition. Elaine pushed through the swinging door.

The editor worked alone, setting up next week's headline. His eyes bulged at sight of Elaine and for once he forgot his formal bow of greeting.

"Hey," he said, "This is private back here!"

Elaine nodded. "Maybe this should be a private conversation."

"But—but—" Nervousness gave way to a trace of fear. Elaine Forbush had been on Grove Dameron's side of the game, and the newspaper had changed sides. "I'm blamed busy."

"This won't take long. As a newspaperman, you have information on everything that happens, haven't you, Mr. Kearn?"

The editor straightened his round shoulders. "I pride myself that I have," he said.

"Then I want the full story on that new Dean Riker will that Mr. Conray dug up."

Job Kearn dropped his stick of type. "Now see here—there are some things that are confidential."

"That's exactly what I want, the confidential information."

"But I can't—it's impossible—"

Elaine glanced around the cluttered shop at the bundles of paper, the spindles of hand-written notes, the stacked type cases—particularly the fine type, each letter in its small compartment. She let the cold anger come into her eyes.

"I'd hate to lose my temper in this place!"

Kearn's mouth flew open. "No!" he gasped. "No. Remember, you're a lady!"

"And you're a gentleman—I hope! If you forget it for one minute, I can always call in Grove Dameron. I believe you well remember what he did to your lawyer friend."

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The newspaperman wiped an inky hand across his sweating brow.

"I'll get it for you," he said shakily. He turned to a bulging cupboard, dragged out a dog-eared notebook, and flipped it open. There, in the editor's own scrawled handwriting, was a list of all the vital information, the date, place, time, witnesses—everything.

ELAINE grabbed up a pencil and pad of paper from the shelf to copy the notes, but her hand shook until the lines scrambled like chicken scratchings in a wet corn field.

"Copy it for me, please," she requested. And she watched each word and figure as the editor noted it down, to be sure it matched the original writing in the book.

"Thank you, Mr. Kearn," she said shortly, taking the paper from his hand. "You'll guarantee the accuracy of this information, of course?"

"That you can depend on," Job Kearn declared. He made a wry attempt at a grin. "This is all public knowledge anyhow. You wouldn't have had to badger me for it."

"Then why," Elaine countered. "were you so stubborn?"

She pushed through the swinging door, with its printer's ink handprints, and hurried out of the office to her buggy. She tried three times before she could keep her trembling foot on the step and pull herself up. She turned the rig around, and the little mare headed for home while Elaine hung desperately to keep from dropping the lines. Her strength was completely gone.

By the time she reached the Bradded N ranch house and pulled up to the hitch-rail her breathing had steadied, and some of her confidence began to return. The beginning of a rough chore, she told herself, was always the worst.

She met her father coming up from the corral.

"I'm going over to Reganville for a few days," she announced.

Quick concern furrowed Randolph's brow. "Not alone again? Wait 'til day after tomorrow and I'll—"

Elaine shook her head. "I can't delay. I'll have to leave right away, on tonight's stage."

"Grove Dameron?" Randolph smiled in quiet reminiscence. "You're just like your mother used to be. When you get that fighting light in your eye, there's no stopping you! So I'd better drive you in to town to meet the late stage."

Elaine arrived in Reganville in the early hours of the morning, her eyes weary and red-rimmed from lack of sleep, and registered at the Marquis Hotel, the best place in town. But rest was out of the question, with the big chore waiting to be tackled.

She had the name of the lawyer who had drawn up the last-minute will and testament of Dean Riker, giving everything to his black-sheep son. She went at once to find his, Vern Satterlin's, office.

It turned out to be an empty room, with the meager furnishings held for back rent.

"Satterlin?" the owner answered Elaine's query. "I reckon he's gone to California for his health, from what folks say."

"Could you tell me, please, about when he left?"

The man scratched back of his ear. "It wasn't too long ago—the last time. I saw him around town only a few days back, but never managed to catch up with him to collect my rent."

"The last time? Then he had gone away before?"

"Oh, that fancy jasper was always gallivanting over to the railroad towns to ride the trains."

Elaine went back to her hotel. There were two witnesses who had signed the document, and she had their names. There should be little difficulty in finding them.

THREE days later Elaine ran down the last clue. One of the names was entirely unknown, and the other signature belonged to a footloose drifter who had moved on to distant parts.

She called then on Doc Manning, who had attended Dean Riker during his last hours. Maybe, she hoped, Doc Manning would admit that Riker had been out of his head on that date.

But the good doctor had gone out of

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town on an emergency case. When he returned two days later he assured Elaine that his patient, Dean Riker, had been mentally sound right up to the hour of his death.

"The lawyer from your town—Ash Conray, I believe his name was—already questioned me on that same subject," the doctor said. "I thought I had made it quite clear."

Elaine bit her lips. Conray wouldn't have missed a single point. There was hardly any use in going on.

But the name Vern Satterlin kept running through her mind. If she could find the man, if she could once hear the story straight from his lips, she would have to be satisfied that it was true, that Dean Riker actually had changed his mind and deliberately and in good faith had made a new will that left his nephew, Grove Dameron, without a trace of a claim.

The following morning Elaine took the stage to the nearest railroad station, a dry and cinder-blown little town called Galt. The station agent could give her no help.

"They come and they go," he said, shrugging. He hitched up his black sleeve guards and went about his bills of lading.

Elaine carried her valise over to the only two-story building, a weathered frame structure with the name, "Hotel Victoria," crowded across its narrow false front, and got a room. Someone in this town must know Vern Satterlin, and find them if she had to stay a week.

It didn't take that long. Quite a number of people knew the lawyer, Elaine discovered. He had been a regular visitor in Galt. He came not to catch the train but to sit in on a poker game with the saloon owner and a couple of big ranchers from the north. The game held such interest that it had been repeated on several occasions. Small fortunes had changed hands.

But Vern Satterlin hadn't been seen in town for over a week. Nobody had the slightest idea of his whereabouts.

"Maybe he *did* go to California," one old-timer said. "He came out way ahead on the last game, I hear tell."

Discouraged, Elaine packed her valise. She checked out of the hotel and trudged through the dust and cinders to the stage station. She was beaten. She gazed out over the shimmering road with tear-blurred eyes. Never, she felt sure, would she see Grove Dameron again. His pride would keep him away.

A train whistled in the distance, long and low and mournful. Elaine shivered. She would have liked to take the train instead of the stage, and ride to any place at all rather than go back to Peridot and Castle Valley, where every foot of dusty ground reminded her of Grove and their brief, elusive moments together.

BUT her father would be expecting her home. And the stage was pulling into town, harness jangling, driver shouting. Elaine had her foot on the step, the driver giving her a hand up, when the last desperate chance occurred to her.

"Something I forgot," she cried, turning back. "Wait!"

The driver shook his head. "We're late now. Got to roll."

"Then go on without me. Sorry—"

She hurried back across the dusty street to the Hotel Victoria, the only hotel in town, her pulse quickening with faint hope.

The hotelkeeper looked up in surprise. "Back again?"

"Does everybody who stays here have to register?" Elaine asked.

The man nodded. "Those are the rules, Ma'am."

"May I look over the list of names and dates?"

"Yep." He shoved the register across the counter. "It's open to the world."

Elaine turned back quickly to the day the Dean Riker will had been written, signed and sealed. Two men had registered, both strangers. She glanced back another day, and her heart pounded in her throat. There was Vern Satterlin's signature!

"This—" Elaine gasped. "This man—" She pointed to the smudgy writing.

"The part-time lawyer," the hotel man remarked, glancing at the name. He spun the book around. "Stayed four days that time. See the check-out date? Must have left on a Sunday."

"You're sure?" Elaine demanded. "You

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are absolutely certain of these dates?"

"I'd stake my life on it," the man said.

Two days later the stage, with Elaine sitting tensely on the edge of the leather seat, pulled into Peridot just before noon. Someone she knew would be in town, she hope—one or another of the neighbors, who could take her out to the Bradded N. Or she would have to hire a rig at the livery stable. She couldn't waste another moment.

But even before the coach had shuddered to a stop she saw the men gathering in the street. There was her father, and Sam Horn and Pete Lacy. And more neighbors rode up from the west, their faces set and dark as gathering thunder clouds.

Elaine dropped her valise at the depot and ran to meet her father, unable to hide the concern in her eyes.

"Rustlers," Randolph said, putting the whole weight of his anger into the word. "They ran off some of Pete's best steers and several head of Sam's breeding stock. No Bradded N stuff missing yet that I know of, but that isn't saying they won't hit us next."

"If you ask me," Pete Lacy put in, "it's Deuce Riker or some of his snake-blooded maverickers starting up operations in the valley. Deuce Riker's crowd isn't likely to reform overnight."

Elaine caught her father's arm. "Don't start out after the rustlers, please, until I can get Grove to join you."

Randolph frowned. "We want to ride as soon as the boys can get together, and cover what ground we can before night."

"Sam went out and talked to Grove," Pete Lacy said. "We wanted all the help we could get. But he claimed fighting rustlers was no concern of his."

Elaine caught her breath. "I'll bring him back,"" she said.

IN A livery-stable buggy behind a fast team, Elaine covered the rough miles in brief and reckless minutes. Grove met her at the wire gate, a chill light in his blue eyes.

"Let the big Bar V handle your rustler trouble," he declared.

"The suspicion is," Elaine explained, trying to keep the tremor of helpless tears out of her voice, "that Deuce Riker or some of his men may be the rustlers themselves."

Grove shrugged. "You read the newspaper. Castle Valley welcomed Deuce Riker. Now they've got him, for better or worse."

Elaine bit her lips, tears heavy on her dark lashes. "Grove, how can you be so stubborn? They need your help. As a rancher, you can't give up like this."

"Rancher?" Grove spread his hands to indicate the few flat and stoney acres around the crude cabin, his eyes brittle with hurt.

"Grove, you didn't want men toadying to you when *you* were the Bar V. You hated their boot-licking. You despised even your friends. Now's your chance to *earn* their respect. Don't you see, Grove, it's like back at Thalia! It's more than a chance; it's your duty." Elaine stopped, the words choked in her throat.

There was no use. Blindly she backed the nervous team around to start back down the trail for town. She didn't dare to look back. Another minute and she would weaken and tell him what she had learned in the little town of Galt. And they'd be starting the same hopeless tangle all over again.

But Grove was still standing by the gate post. She had to see his face once more, to try to understand the harsh struggle in his eyes, to give him every chance. She looked at the slouch of his shoulders, like a man who had given up, and at the bitter line of his mouth. Grove's blue eyes were darkened with the barren look of a man who feels himself useless, without a true place among his fellow men.

"Grove," Elaine called, "I didn't want to ask it as a personal favor, but Dad and I *do* need your help. Fifty head of our prime steers—" She let the words hang. Some day he would forgive her, she prayed, for the lie she had implied.

Grove started, and he swallowed heavily as though a lump had choked his throat. "Let me get my gun," he said hoarsely. "I'll borrow a horse from Hank and meet you in town."

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Elaine spoke to the team and drove away fast, before he could see the tears that streamed down her cheeks and splashed away into the dust of the spinning buggy wheels.

A group of armed and solemn men had gathered on the main street of Peridot. But Grove rode into town right behind Elaine's buggy, and Hank Wallock came with him. Randolph Forbush called to Grove and motioned him into the group. Pete Lacy explained what they had learned so far.

"Then they're heading across the Craw River," Grove declared. "I worked through the badlands for over a week last month, rounding up Bar V stock. I can take you down the short trail." He swung his horse into the lead and spurred away on the east road.

Hank Wallock turned in the saddle to wink at Elaine, and he rode his bay gelding close to the buggy. "That boy makes a first-rate leader," he declared, "when he lets himself go." Hank nudged his horse to a gallop to catch up with the party.

ELAINE sat holding the reins on a street suddenly deserted and deathly quiet. A chill of foreboding gripped her heart and she wanted to cry out, to drive after the men and bring them back. Her father and Grove Dameron, the men who meant more to her than anything else in the world, were both riding into mortal danger. And she had urged them on, had even tricked Grove into riding in the lead.

Elaine whirled the team around and raced for home before her will failed her. She had to busy herself with the thousand chores about the ranch that needed her attention, or she would find herself saddling up to ride after the men. And because she was a woman they would only send her home again.

But between chores, every half-hour she could spare, Elaine drove back into town to haunt the street for word of the manhunt party. She was there when Sam Horn came back to get the doctor. Sam had a bullet in his thigh, but the other man lay on the trail with two holes in his lungs.

"What about Dad and Grove?"

"Both solid and sound," Sam assured her. "Grove led us straight to the hideout. We shot down all but two—Deuce Riker's snake-eyed foreman and a half-breed. We strung them to a couple of Cottonwood limbs. A blamed messy business!" Sam spat in the dust. "But the boys are bringing all our stock back."

"And Deuce Riker?" Elaine asked. "Was he one—"

"Deuce gave us the slip. But he's in it up to his fancy silk neck scarf. Seems like the first thing he did when he got his hands on the Bar V was to start using it for a rustler hang-out. We gave his yellow-bellied foreman plenty of time to talk before we strung him up."

Elaine drove home with a great weight off her heart. Her father was safe, and Grove had proven himself. The future was unfolding more glorious promise than she yet dared to believe. But above it all still hung one ominous cloud—Deuce Riker.

It was on her next trip to town that she saw the man himself. She stifled a cry in her throat. Then, unbelieving, she shaded her eyes and studied the outlaw as he reined up at the hitch-rail in front of the Antelope Saloon. Beyond a doubt he was Deuce Riker, but she could not understand the swaggering nerve that would bring him into Peridot in broad daylight.

Elaine sat frozen, gripping tight reins, as Riker swung out of the saddle, hitched his horse at the rail, and walked over to the saloon doors. He looked in, then changed his mind and crossed the sidestreet, and went on up the block to the Painted Owl.

Elaine was still frozen when she spotted Grove Dameron leading a limping horse out of the alley across the street, his short-cut bringing him straight toward her. Forgetting the team, she jumped down and ran to him.

"Grove," she cried, "are you hurt?"

Grove shook his head, grinning. "Horse threw a shoe."

"Grove, be careful! Deuce Riker is in town. He's up at the Painted Owl."

Elaine's eyes were full of fear as she looked up at Grove's face.

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GROVE stiffened, instantly alert. He drew his gun, checked the loads, and slid it lightly into his holster.

"No, Grove," Elaine whispered. "You've got to keep out of sight 'til the rest of the men get here."

Grove shook his head. "Is that his sorrel?" He motioned to the gelding at the hitch-rack only ten feet away. "Then I'm between the man and his horse."

"But, Grove, don't you see—" Elaine gripped his arm, nails biting into flesh, and tried to force him back.

"Grove Dameron!" The words echoed in the street, the voice of a man hoarse with pent-up anger.

Elaine spun around. Deuce Riker stood on the plank sidewalk in front of the Painted Owl, his hands open at his sides.

"Grove Dameron!" Riker repeated. "You've got no posse of carbines behind you now! We're all alone, you and me." He took a step forward, muscles twitching. "Come and get me, you chuck-line tramp!"

"Grove," Elaine whispered. "No." But Grove Dameron was already walking, slowly, deliberately toward the outlaw. There was no turning him back, no stopping him. Live or die, he had to go on.

But he couldn't die—not now, when everything was straightening out, when he had everything to live for! She had to get help. Deuce Riker was an outlaw, a killer.

The street was nearly deserted. Only one man, an elderly homesteader, sat on the high seat of his wagon. Elaine ran to him.

But the homesteader wanted no part of the fight. He jumped down and ducked around a store building. Elaine caught hold of the wagon wheel in sobbing, helpless anger. There was no time left. Her eye fell on a battered claw hammer in the open jockey-box at the front of the wagon. She snatched it up, swung it high, and threw it in a wild, whistling arc at Deuce's head.

But even as the hammer left her fingers, the outlaw was drawing his gun. She had been seconds late!

But the roar of the sixgun came too soon. It was the report of Grove's gun. When Riker's weapon flamed, it was still aslant in his hand. The bullet tore the dust and Deuce Riker buckled over to spill headlong on the planks.

Like an echo to the shots, the hammer Elaine had thrown too late crashed into the saloon window. But she hardly noticed. Grove was still alive and unhurt!

Then, as if by magic, the street was filled with people. Clerks and storekeepers crowded around, and the returning ranchers left their recovered herd at the edge of town to ride in and surround Grove. Even the lawyer, Ash Conray, appeared.

Grove saw Conray and stepped up to face him. "I believe this makes me owner of the Bar V—once again," he declared.

"Quite right." Conray said. "But it will take time and some expense."

"Just a minute, Mr. Conray," Elaine cut in, her voice edged. "There will be no more concern over the last-minute will of Dean Riker, because Dean Riker never made out that last will. The day your crooked friend, Vern Satterlin, was supposed to have drawn up that will, he was forty miles away.

Conray went white. A murmur of astonishment came from the crowd and grew rapidly to an angry growl. The lawyer stepped back, and his hand flew to an inside pocket. The little derringer appeared in his fingers just as Grove hit him. Conray sprawled full length in the dust.

"Let's string him up," somebody yelled.

Ash Conray scrambled to his feet, his dark suit ruined, and dashed wildly through the crowd. He grabbed Deuce Riker's sorrel from the hitch-rack and spurred for the open road.

"Word will spread," Pete Lacy declared. "His hash is settled."

Randolph's neighbor, Chris Alberg, jumped up on the sidewalk. "Come on, Grove," he shouted. "This calls for a celebration. We're buying the drinks."

Grove grinned easily. "Thanks, boys, but I had a different kind of celebration in mind." He slipped an arm around Elaine and swept her to him. "Elaine and I are getting married as fast as we can round up a preacher. After all this girl has done for me, I'm not letting her out of my sight." His arms closed around her and his lips pressed hers in a fervent, possessive kiss.

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"I'll slug him as he comes through the door," Sant said

The Lonely Ones

By Jeanne Williams

LACEY BJORNSEN sank her axe in the chopping log and scooped up an armload of split kindling. A faint powdering of snow lay on the wood, melting against the warmth of her strong young arms inside the denim jacket as she carried her load to the smokehouse and stacked it evenly on the growing pile.

It was November and she should have finished storing the winter's wood supply weeks earlier, but there'd been too much for her to get done alone—hog-butchering, starting the new chicks, getting the barn roof patched good enough to keep the storms off her stock. Blinking to clear her lashes of the thickening snow, Lacey went back to the wood pile.

Even if a bad storm did blow in, she hadn't done too badly. Her throat tightened, and she bit her lip as she knelt and gathered

LACEY WAS TRYING to be hard and independent, but she was a woman . . . and her heart turned traitor. . . .

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more kindling. Pop would be proud of her if he knew. Folks had said a pretty eighteen-year-old girl couldn't manage the work on the lonesome farm, go on living there by herself. They had said she ought to sell the place Sven Bjornsen had cleared out of the wilderness, and they had offered her work as school teacher, clerk, or waitress—maybe because they felt guilty over Sven's death. But Lacey, standing by her father's grave, had looked straight through them, the ranchers and merchants and townspeople.

"No," she had said, shaking her head, "I'm staying."

Pete Markey, red-faced and concerned, had protested.

"But you can't do that! You got no one to help you, Lacey, no one at all to depend on."

He had been one of the leaders of the posse, a leader who had stayed home while her father rode after the rustlers. She looked at him with a bitterness that was almost hatred, then stared around the shamed circle till they seemed to move together for support. She was so tired out with grief she could barely stand, but she kept her voice steady, as Sven had trained her.

"I've got myself to depend on, nobody else. That's a good thing, because I won't be expecting help that I won't get. I thank you, Pete, and I thank the rest of you, but please don't talk about it to me any more."

They hadn't, and after what seemed eternities they got into their wagons and buggies and saddles and left. She had fallen beside the grave then and cried, as she had not been able to with anyone watching. And maybe that was the reason she bore Clay Roark such a grudge, because he had come back and found her sobbing. A stranger to her then, the young blond U. S. Marshal had knelt awkwardly and tamped a few spring flowers by the crude wooden headstone.,

"Your father was a mighty brave man, Miss Lacey," he had said, fumbling for the words. "I'll try to finish what he started."

BECAUSE her heart was breaking, and because Clay was alive while Sven was dead, Lacey had sprung to her feet. "I doubt you have the nerve!" she'd cried. "If you do, don't expect me to thank you. You're tracking rustlers for a gang of fat, smug cowards who'll sit around and talk about what a brave posse they were. They won't say that they stayed home while Pop got killed."

"He was the sheriff," Clay had said, his shoulders squaring. Then he said a funny thing. "Sometimes it takes a man who is too much of something—proud, lonesome, brave—to make things safe for most people. I think they're made like that on purpose, and I think they know it. Good morning, Miss Lacey."

She had stared after him long moments after the hoofbeats faded, shocked, angry, wondering if he could be right. Sven had talked a little like that a few times, but Sven was dead. Cowards had let him die, and nothing Clay said could change that.

Looking up at the cloudy March skies, Lacey had vowed to hold the farm her father had claimed, to live to herself and be beholden to no one. It was fall now, eight months since she had made that promise, and as she banged the smokehouse door on the last load of wood she thought she had fulfilled it fairly well. Pete Markey and many of the townsfolk and neighbors had been out to visit and argue with her. The men had offered to plow the garden, to fell the timber, to do the haying, but she had said no to them all and hired what help she needed, a flagrant breach of the traded labor law of the frontier.

No man, she had thought grimly as she refused the friendly overtures, was going to buy her gratitude with his axe or saw or plow when he had failed to back her father with a gun. To a few who had been persistent she said this plainly, and after a while there were fewer offers and fewer visits, and less warmth in the greetings when she went to town.

I don't care, Lacey thought. I don't need them. I don't need anyone. She shivered a little, though, as the snow came driving down in earnest, and hurried to shut the

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door of the chicken house. She had already fed the hens and milked her two cows, so, whistling to her collie, Lars, she shielded her face with her arm and beat through the snow to the house. Lars, tumbling in behind her, shot past her into the biggest room of the small cabin and went wild with barking.

Rustlers? Some outlaw driven in by the storm? A chill shot down Lacey's spine as she realized she was too far from her father's Winchester, over in the closet by the door.

"Hey!" yelled a deep laughing voice, "call off your dog. I'm too frozen to jump very lively."

Lacey ran into the long front room "Lars," she called. "Down, boy, down!" The tall dark young man in the middle of the braided rag carpet stepped forward with a grin.

"Maybe he'll believe I'm harmless if you'll shake hands, Miss. I'm Sant McCrory. Got caught in the storm, and I didn't think you'd grudge me shelter. I took the liberty of building up a fire and making some coffee. How about a cup?"

IT WAS unsettling to find a stranger in your home, one who offered you your own coffee, but he smiled with a sunny devilment that melted some of the starch from the tone Lacey used to brash young men.

"I'm Lacey Bjornsen," she said, and gave him her hand for a moment that lengthened till she flushed and drew back hastily. "Thanks, I will have some coffee." She turned back through the kitchen and made a big business of slipping off her wet boots and jacket, while she watched him pour the coffee. From the corner of her eye she saw that he moved with a lazy grace that made him seem younger and slimmer than he actually was.

"Here you are," he said. "Gosh, am I glad you have real cream! Sugar?" Lacey took the cup from him.

"I'll sweeten it myself," she said briefly.

"You'll curdle it with that tone of voice. Surely you don't mind my having something to drink in a warm house? Or are you going to have your menfolks kick me out into a snow drift?"

Frowning, Lacey decided to tell him straight. "If anyone throws you out, Mr. McCrory, it'll be me. I live here alone. Don't get any ideas and you can stay till the storm slacks."

"I can't help having ideas," he said, his warm gaze on her like a caress, "but I won't do anything rash. All right?"

In spite of the fiery little thrill that shot through her, Lacey tried to keep her words cool. "I wouldn't set a dog out in this weather, unless he got to thinking he was a lobo. Then I might skin him and stretch his pelt."

"Relax." He chuckled, leaning back and rolling a cigarette. "I get the general idea. It's just kind of a shock to find a girl like you way out here at the edge of the wilderness."

"I manage."

A dark eyebrow curved upward. "You sure do! But don't you ever get lonesome?"

Oh Lord, didn't she! There were the nights when the wind howled till she'd get scared and light a lamp, which only frightened her worse with the flickering gloomy shapes it cast. There were mornings when she'd look out and see only the untroubled calm of the timberland and think that if she should get hurt or die no one would know it for weeks.

Besides, she was young, and the sharp grief for her father was dulling till she could think of other things. Of how long, for instance, it had been since a personable man watched her with the frank admiration Sant McCrory's glance held. But of course she said none of this to him. Her pride wouldn't let her.

"Lonesomeness is a word for empty people, people who can't stand their own company and don't keep busy. I have plenty to do, keeping the work caught up." She got to her feet. "I think I'll go make sure the hens aren't piling up and smothering each other. They have a bad trick of doing that."

Sant was up in an instant. "I'll do it," he said, and got into his mackinaw before she could act independent.

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"Well—" She nodded reluctantly. It was nice to be comfortable and let someone else worry about the silly chickens. "It's almost dark. You'd better take the lantern. It's there on the porch by the snowshoes."

"Snowshoes?" Sant came back in with the lantern. Watching the golden light deepen the angles of his jaw, Lacey thought she had never seen a more reckless face, or such a handsome one. "What do you use them for?"

THAT tight lump swelled in her throat as it did when she thought of Sven, so strong and quiet and blue-eyed with kindness for everyone. "Dad thought they'd be good for covering ground when snow cakes up a horse's shoes. Lots of the ranchers use them now, especially after a storm when they're hunting lost cattle. Bjornsen's boots, they call them around here."

There was no one left to fill them. Sven stood tall and took long, easy steps, and he had worn the sheriff's badge when other men had been afraid. Lacey felt such a swell of desolation that she scarcely heard Sant go out.

Oh Pop, she thought, clenching her fists, why did you stick your neck out for them? They weren't worth it, not the whole passel of them, and you'd still be alive and I wouldn't be alone. Oh Pop!

For a minute her head went down in her hands, and her shoulders shook. Then the crunching footsteps outside jerked her back to realization that she wasn't, that night at least, alone. Far from it, she thought involuntarily as Sant came in.

He seemed to fill the place with male vitality, with his teasing grin and speculative dark eyes.

"I was only in town a day," he said, "but I heard about your father. He must have been quite a guy. I heard about you, but I didn't think anyone could be as pretty as they said. You're prettier, Lacey. When you came in from the storm with snow on your hair and a sprinkling on that turned-up nose of yours, I thought you were a snow fairy. Then when you talked I wondered if you were the snow queen, because her heart was ice, too, you know, and she froze the poor mortals who fell in love with her."

"A snow queen in levis?" Lacey said jeeringly, but she was pleased in spite of a natural distrust of any man who spoke easily, who talked about love at first meeting. Of course he was different from the men she had known. She doubted if Clay Roark even knew what color her eyes were, just as, looking away in embarrassment, she doubted whether there was anything about her that Sant hadn't noticed. "What were you doing in town?" she asked hastily, to keep him from voicing any of the things his gaze was saying.

He shot her a bright questioning glance as if he were gauging her reaction, then gave his broad shoulders a hitch.

"Playing a lone hand in a poker game. I cleaned the good citizens so slick they kind of hinted at me to leave. I was ready. Don't like crowds or towns. You don't hold gambling against me, Lacey, when we're so much alike?"

"The people in that town are no friends of mine," she said, crushing back the accusing knowledge that though Sven had played his share of draw and stud, he hadn't liked professional card men. "I wouldn't care if you took every cent they had."

"Swell." Sant grinned. "I did my best. I'm in luck, I guess, first at cards, and then in finding you. I supposed some whiskered old hermit was holed up out here. But instead—" he came over and took her hands, cupping them loosely in his— "I find a fairy right out of the snow whose heart, I hope, isn't ice."

It wasn't; it felt as if molten lead pumped hotly through it instead of blood. Lacey tried to draw her hands back. "Please, Sant—" she whispered.

HE DID something she had never even heard of. He turned her palm up and his mouth brushed it and traveled up to the thrumming pulse in her wrist. She knew he felt the caged beating, for when he looked up the reckless cast of his face was stronger, gaily confident.

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"You aren't ice," he said, "and you don't like living alone."

Sudden weakness, a foolish melting of her knees, turned Lacey's voice queer when she could finally speak.

"You'll be alone out in the storm in a minute! If you want to stay here, you'll behave yourself. I'll make you up a pallet in here."

He bowed mockingly. "Gosh, thanks. Are you going to sleep with that Winchester in your hand?"

"It'll be at the head of my bed," Lacey said deliberately, turning her back on him. "And Lars sleeps on the floor by my shoes, so I imagine you won't have any trouble being good."

Long after the lamp was out and the fire only coals, Lacey lay awake. With relief and some irritation, she heard Sant's deep breathing and knew he slept. She hadn't wanted to have to fight him off, but it was half aggravating to know he was in the next room on the verge of snoring while she tossed restlessly. She wasn't sure of anything about him except that he was too good-looking, and that he seemed to share her disdain for settled communities. She remembered the warmth of his lips on her hand and blushed hotly, shoving at her pillow.

Maybe she had been alone too long, maybe she was missing life and pleasure and the thrill of being pursued, but— For some reason, the gray eyes of Clay Roark seemed to look at her in the moment before she fell asleep—or perhaps she was dreaming.

A thunderous knocking sent her springing out of bed: It was still dark, and she stepped on Lars' tail so that he yelped before he bolted to the door and sat up a barking clamor. Lacey dragged an old coat on over her flannel nightgown and, holding the Winchester, hurried to the door. Sant, a slim black shadow, was suddenly beside her.

"Who do you think it is?" he whispered, and to Lacey's strained senses he sounded almost afraid.

"If anyone found a man here," she said with a little choking laugh, "my name wouldn't be worth a Confederate dollar. Stay in the kitchen and keep still." Funny how important her good name seemed, now she was in danger of losing it. She realized with derision that she was less afraid of rustlers or outlaws than of some well-meaning but gossipy neighbor who would spread the story.

The knock sounded again and the knob twisted a little as if the door were being tried. Lacey, seeing that Sant had vanished, dragged Lars back and called, "Who is it?"

"Clay Roark," came the voice, rough with relief. "You're all right, Lacey?"

LACEY drew her coat closer up under her chin. What was the U. S. Marshal doing out here in a snow storm? "I'm fine," she said. "What are you out this way for, Mr. Roark?" Sant's whisper startled her. He had moved into the dark corner beyond her.

"Let him in. I'll slug him as he steps through the door."

"No!" she said, giving Sant a shove. "Go out to the barn or the smokehouse till he leaves!" He swore under his breath, but Clay's voice came again, a note of suspicion in it.

"Why don't you let me in, Lacey? I'm half frozen. I'll only have some coffee and be on my way."

"Well—" She peered around, made sure Sant had really gone. The sound of the back door closing came to her ears, and she hastily yanked open the front one to hide the noise. "All right, Mr. Roark. You build up the fire in here and I'll fix you some coffee."

He stepped in, bowing a little to get his blond head through the door. She felt guilty at the glad satisfaction in his gray eyes as she turned to him.

"I was worried about you," he said simply. "Not just the storm, I knew you could handle that. But it seems a drifter, a card-sharp, heard about you while he was fleecing the boys, and Pete Markey figured he might have headed out this way. You haven't been bothered?"

Sant had pretended not to know she lived alone. That thought struck Lacey

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hard, but then she thought, so what if he did want to see me and pretended not to know about me when he came? What else could he have done? I'd have thought he was a wolf otherwise. Besides it made her mad that Pete Markey and the people in town were talking about her, and that Clay had ridden out in a storm to be sure her visitors met with the town's approval. It was none of their business!

"You had a long trip for nothing," she said cuttingly. "I have a lock on the door, a dog, and my rifle. I can take care of any trouble that comes along, and it seems to me a U. S. Marshal should have more important things to do than carry home gossip for the Ladies' Aid sewing circle."

Turning on that, she marched into the kitchen, lit a lamp, hastily kicked Sant's pallet into a heap under the table, and built a fire in the cookstove. Clay came in as she was setting the coffee pot on. She busily ignored him.

"Lacey," he said, "why do you want to kick me in the teeth?" She swung around, laughing scornfully.

"Am I supposed to enjoy being waked up in the middle of the night?"

The muscles in his cheek jerked and tautened. He took a step forward, then checked himself with obvious difficulty. "You need to be waked up, somehow, sometime, if it's possible. Or maybe you like to sit out here and hate everybody's guts. You reckon your father would be proud of the way you're acting?"

"You weren't here when it happened! You don't know how it was. You—you've got no right to say anything."

HIS eyes were bleak. "Crazy as it is, I care about you. That gives me a right to talk, and I'm going to. It's true I didn't know your dad, that I didn't hit town till before the funeral, but from the way folks talk I know he liked people even if he didn't live plunk down among them. I think he'd call your pride damned selfishness."

Lacey clenched her fists. "What do you mean?"

"I mean you've refused to let anyone share your grief, help you, pay the debt they feel they owe. You mean to keep grinding their faces into the fact they weren't heroes all the rest of their lives?"

She slapped him as hard as she could. He stared at her a minute and the red fingerprints wealed up on his white face. "I won't be wanting that coffee." He turned, and as he did his gaze seemed to go to the pile of bedding under the table. Stiffening, Lacey watched as he crossed over and yanked the covers out.

"Leave those alone!" she cried. "My dog sleeps there!"

"I'll bet!" His tone crackled like a whip, and there was hurt and scorn in his eyes, along with a strange despairing look, like a dream dying. "Does your dog use a pillow?"

He kicked the white cushion out on the floor. Lacey jerked erect. "All right, there was a man here. At least he doesn't ride herd on a bunch of scared sheep the way you do. Go back and let your tongue wag at both ends. I don't care what they think!"

"If that's the way you want it—" He paused with his hand on the door. "I guess I rode out for nothing. I guess you know what you want. Just one thing, Lacey. A man who'll cheat at cards will cheat at other things. Good night and good luck."

He went out into the falling snow. With a pang, Lacey remembered that she had told Sant she wouldn't send a dog out into the storm. Clay was no dog. Honesty made her admit that. But he had jumped to conclusions about the blankets, and he kept talking up for the people he was hired to protect, people who had no strength of their own. Sant at least ran on his own courage—he rode alone and stayed aloof. The name of card-sharp didn't mean anything. It was always tacked on to any stranger who was lucky at cards. Still, she felt an odd sense of loss at the memory of Clay's disappointed gaze.

She took the coffee off the stove, blew out the lamp, and went back to bed. When Sant came in she pretended to be asleep.

He was gone when she woke up next morning. Relieved, a little piqued, Lacey ate breakfast, put on her heavy clothes,

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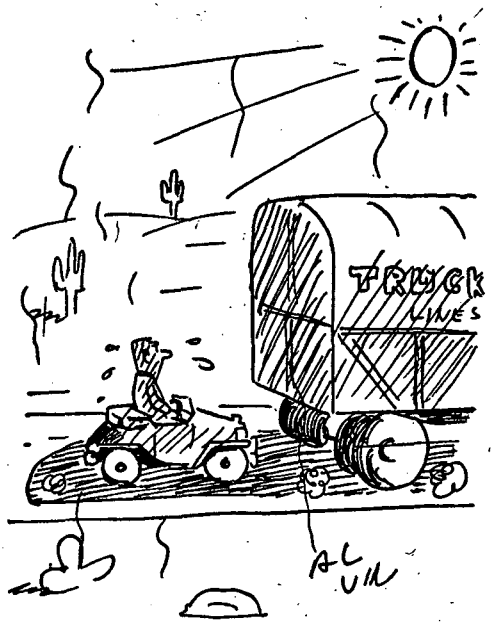
and went out to do the chores. The snow had stopped and lay crisp and white glistening in the first sunlight. The tracks of Sant's boots ran through the yard toward the barn, and also to the chicken house.

Bewildered, Lacey went down and peered in. The hens were clucking, and a few were still pecking at the feed bins and drinking at the water fountains, freshly filled. Why, Sant had fed and watered them! Turning, a curious warmth stirring at her heart, Lacey went to the barn.



THE hay had been forked down. Grain was in the horses' boxes, and Sant, a full pail in his hand, was just coming from the milk stalls.

"Sant," Lacey exclaimed, not able to help the tremor in her voice. "You didn't need to do all this. But thanks. It's awfully nice of you."

At her confusion, the sheepish grin on his face turned into a confident one. "Shucks, I'd like to do lots nicer things for you Lacey. You're the first person who's treated me decent in a long time. You didn't tip the law-dog off to me last night." They went out of the barn together.

"Why should I have?" she demanded. "I'm no friend of that bunch in town. If they can't gamble it's their tough luck."

They stepped inside the smokehouse where the milk strainer was, and Sant put down the pail. She knew he was going to take her in his arms even before he did it.

"I knew you'd be that way," he murmured, and the reckless hair-trigger blaze was back in his dark eyes. "You and me, we don't need a lot of people." He kissed her with near cruelty, till Lacey, shaken and confused, pushed him away. "I'll be back," he said, and turned with a tinkle of spurs.

Lacey, her face in her hands, heard after a while the chunking sound of a horse on snow as he rode off.

He came back several times, always lending his strength to help her do heavy work, always gay and handsome with arrogance in the set of his thin face. Sometimes Lacey thought he seemed too prideful, she caught an occasional inflection of self-doubt and fear in his bold words, but she hastily pushed such thoughts from her mind. She had been unbearably lonesome and now Sant, a man who felt as she did about her neighbors, had come. She grew to look forward to his visits, but for some reason she avoided his lovemaking and he didn't insist.

When her stubborn mind dwelled on Clay Roark, she shrugged and worked hard at something till she could forget the accusing hurt she had last seen on his face. She heard, through a visit from Pete Markey, that Clay was still hunting the rustlers Sven had died trying to catch. If he tried to get any help, he might find out what a fine bunch of cowards he was working for!

Sant asked her once what she thought about the rustling.

"For all of me," she said harshly, "they can use every long loop they want to. People who won't fight to take care of what's theirs ought to lose it, instead of begging other men into doing their fighting." She had been too upset to wonder about the strange smile on Sant's lips as he stood up.

"I'm taking a trip," he said, "but I won't

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be long. Maybe when I come back I'll have enough money for you to marry me."

SANT as a friend was fine, but she couldn't picture him as a husband. He seemed too young and wild and undependable. Lacey shook her head. "Sant, don't make any plans." She added as gently as she could, "I'm not ready to marry. Perhaps I've been selfish, keeping you here."

He whirled on her. "You think about it! You're the only girl I care about. I'll buy you pretty things, night stuff and underwear as frilly as your name. I'll take you places, and do the work, and—and you'll see, if you give me a chance!"

She tried to calm him down, but he went off at last in a temper, though his last words were that he'd be back in a week.

It was sooner than that. She was forking down hay to the cattle three days later, shivering in the morning cold, when she heard a rustle in the loft behind her. Spinning around, she saw Sant. He had edged his way out of a pile of hay and his arms were lifted toward her, along with the desperate pleading of his gaze. There was blood on his face and all over one sleeve.

"Sant!" Stumbling through the loft, she bent down and tried to lift him. "What's happened? Who hurt you?"

"Posse." His face twisted, the dried blood on it cracking. "They caught the other guys. I got away in the dark—came here. Lacey, hide me, please! Please don't let 'em hang me."

"Why are they after you?" she demanded, but he had gone limp in her arms. Staring down at his boy's face, Lacey bit her lip. He didn't play a lone hand after all; in the pinch he needed someone else.

Swiftly checking his wounds, she bound up the fleshy part of his shoulder where he was bleeding. His head was barely grazed, and not bleeding now. He seemed to be afraid that the hunt was close after him, and in any case she couldn't move him from the loft till he was conscious again and could stand. A sound of galloping came from the road.

Lacey got down from the loft, straightened her skirts, and feverishly began milking. If the posse found her at the house this time of morning they might get suspicious. Voices called back and forth, horses neighed, and after a nerve-wringing wait Lacey heard men coming toward the barn. She got up with her half-filled bucket and went to the door. Pete Markey and Clay Roark stood there, while close to a dozen others prowled around the corral, the smokehouse, and the chicken pen.

"Good morning, gentlemen," she said. "Whatever you're doing, can you be quieter? You've got my cows to kicking around."

"Sorry," said Clay, with the courtesy he might have used to a cantankerous stranger. "We're looking for a rustler. Dark, good-looking kid, probably shot up a little. We trailed him here."

Lacey shrugged. "Haven't seen him. You all are pretty brave, aren't you, fourteen men against one kid?" Pete Markey flushed, but Clay's eyes were cool.

"There were eight of them. Seven are dead. I thought you believed people ought to form posses to run down outlaws, Miss Bjornsen. At least you've said that. Now, if you'll pardon me, I'll have a look in the barn."

"You have a search warrant?"

RELUCTANTLY, as if he had hoped to escape it, Clay said, "I don't need a warrant, Lacey. There's blood on the hem of your skirt. Now stand back."

She glanced down, saw with horror that he was right. The men had gathered in from the outbuildings and stood watching with grim determination. Again she seemed to hear Sant's plea, don't let them hang me! She realized that he had shunned people because he was weak and not because he was strong, and yet she couldn't turn him over. She stared frantically at the circle of men—men she had scorned, men she had insulted and named cowards.

How could she expect them to listen to her? How could she beg? But she had to, not because she loved Sant but because he was weak, and had appealed to her.

"Please," she said. "Please. He's awfully young. Let him off with a warning."

Men cleared their throats and shuffled

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their feet, but the dogged set stayed on their faces. Then Clay was beside her, his hand under her arm steadying her.

"Some of you," he said clearly, sweeping the posse with his glance, "feel like you owe Lacey something. You're sorry you didn't back up her father last spring, and it's been on your consciences. Well then, for the life of her father, give her this man's. The gang is wiped out and this kid was a newcomer to it anyhow. Do what Lacey asks you, men."

The gazes of the crowd were on her. Lacey looked back, and for the first time in almost a year saw people, neighbors, friends, as they nodded, agreed, began to grin a little. A cold sheath seemed to crack from her heart, as Pete Markey grunted, "We'll do it, by gum. The kid can go. All right, Lacey?"

She couldn't speak; she did lean over and kiss Pete on the cheek, before she turned away with a sob. After a long winter she was alive again, giving and taking, and it was wonderful, but it hurt, too. The posse melted away and she was left with Clay.

"Lacey, Pete told me something you need to know. He and most of the men volunteered to go with your dad last spring. They didn't want to and they weren't heroes, but they did offer, and Sven said no. He said it was his job, and he knew they really didn't want to come along, and he was a mighty kind man. Now shall I give you a hand with your husband?"

"Husband?" Lacey was shocked. "He isn't—we never—I mean, I just didn't want him to be killed." She realized then why Clay had helped talk the men out of the hanging, and all of a sudden she was in his arms. "I think you're kind, too, Clay!"

He was smiling as he turned her face up. "As soon as we get the kid doctored up," he said, "I want to know what else you think of me."

KNOW YOUR WEST

1. The Cheyenne (Wyoming) Frontier Days Rodeo claims to be "The Daddy of 'em All." In what year did it start: 1887, 1897 or 1907?

2. The famous Hash Knife brand, owned by the Aztec Land & Cattle Co., ran some 50,000 head of cattle in what territory, now a state?

3. Cowboys want most of the whang or leather strings of their riding gear to be plenty strong, but what one such string do they like weak enough to break fairly easily?

4. True or false: Many early western pioneers drove Studebakers.

5. What were the National Forests of the west originally called?

6. Why was the spread of Cattle King John Chisum called "the Jinglebob?"

7. Mounts Sill, Russell, Whitney, North Palisade, Spencer, Fiske and Huxley are peaks in what far western range?

8. Ira Aten of Texas made his place in cow country history as which of the following: sheriff, Ranger, ranch manager, outlaw, train-robber, trail driver or bank-robber?

9. John W. Iliff was famous as a cattle king in what Rocky Mountain state?

10. To what Atlantic Coast state was the Apache warrior-chief Geronimo taken as a prisoner?

——*Rattlesnake Robert*

You will find the answers to these questions on page 108. Score yourself 2 points for each question you answer correctly. 20 is a perfect score. If your total is anywhere from 16 to 20, you're well acquainted with the customs and history of the cow country. If your total score is anywhere from 8 to 14, you will have things to learn. If you're below 8, better get busy polishing up your knowledge of the West.

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Lee lifted the lid of a can and said, "Here's your inheritance"

MOUNTAIN CHASE

By J. L. Bouma

AFTER breaking noon camp, Lee Banner swung into the saddle and said, "Take charge of the pack horse, Watkins. You and Miss Drake ride as far as the turn in the canyon and wait there. I'll be along directly."

Watkins made a grunting sound as he climbed awkwardly on his horse, and Carol Drake smiled at Lee Banner before she turned her mount on up the canyon. Watkins waited until she was out of hearing, then said in a half-curious, half-sullen way, "Something wrong?"

"No."

Watkins's gaze narrowed. "I notice you've been watching our back trail."

"I always watch my back trail."

He spoke curtly, not bothering, now that

THEY WENT INTO the hills to look for gold, and found what they had been seeking all their lives . . . without knowing it

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they were alone, to hide his contempt of Ray Watkins. Lee Banner was a tall, rangy figure on his mustang, trimmed down to bone and sinew. He had a lean, brown face, and eyes bright as a morning sky. He was twenty-six, with an animal's wildness, an animal's caution in him, as different from Watkins as day is from night.

They were of an age and of a size, but this was all they had in common. Watkins was a handsome blond man, and exertion had reddened his face. Three days on the trail had tested his disposition, which was foul. But that wasn't it either, Lee Banner thought, remembering the incident in Pine when Watkins had proved himself a coward.

He touched his mustang with a spur and rode away. This was a deep canyon in mountain country, in a land of streams and timber and high meadows, slashed and scarred by ravines and ridges, but green now beneath an April sun. Lee Banner trotted beside the leaping canyon stream, his mind still on Watkins and on Carol Drake.

"I wonder if she knows?" he murmured, and decided it was impossible to tell. A woman might instinctively realize things about a stranger, where her mind would be closed to the shortcomings of the man she intended to marry.

Lee Banner rode to where the canyon branched out and opened onto a rolling plain. This new branch bent southward and formed a V-shaped notch in the mountain wall, more of a pass than a canyon. After tying his mustang in the trees, Lee Banner pulled his rifle from its saddle scabbard and stationed himself in a cluster of boulders. Some ten minutes later he heard the steady drumming of hoofs, and a few moments after this two riders trotted in sight.

THEY stopped directly below him, where the trail split, and muttered to each other. Before they could move on, Lee Banner stepped from the boulders, the Winchester at his hip.

"Hold up, boys!" he said sharply.

Their hands turned as one, and the bigger man made a move for the gun strapped at his waist. His arm became still as Lee Banner covered him.

"That's better," he said. "Hands on your saddle horns, and keep them there."

He looked at them closely as he came forward, and recognized the bigger man, a fellow named Gleeson, who was a hunter and trapper of sorts. Gleeson was a blocky figure with a bull chest. His face was broad, dark with beard stubble, and his small black eyes flashed with wicked recklessness.

"What's the idea?" he growled.

"I don't like being trailed."

"Trailed?" Gleeson exploded, and gave his companion a brief glance. "Hear that, Finlay? We been trailing anyone?"

Finlay, grinning, shook his head and said nothing. He was a stringy man, with a gaunt face and eyes as unblinkingly watchful as a cat's.

"You've been camping on our trail since we left Pine, three days ago," Lee Banner said. "What's the answer, Gleeson?"

"Since when does a man have to have your permission to head in a certain direction?" Gleeson retorted angrily.

"Which way you heading?"

"Green Lake," Gleeson said, and hooked a thumb southward in the direction of the V-shaped notch. "Got any objections?"

"I will have if you're lying to me."

"Why, damn you—" Gleeson began, and brutal rage flamed in his eyes. "I've heard that the ground shakes when you walk, Banner, so I'll hear you coming."

"Keep listening hard."

"Heard something else, too," Gleeson said, grinning slyly now. "Heard old Charlie Drake's niece hired you to guide her and that Easterner up to Charlie's shack. They came a hell of a ways just to look at a grave, didn't they?" Lee Banner said nothing, and Gleeson guffawed. "I hear she's a looker. Is that right?"

Lee Banner said with soft viciousness, "Move on, and don't cut my trail again, coming or going."

Gleeson took a gusty breath and said hoarsely, "You're a pushing man, Banner. Just don't push me too hard."

"You mean the way Charlie Drake was

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pushed last month? With a bullet in the back?" He saw a watchful stillness settle on the blunt face, and added softly, "What is it you hunt and trap, Gleeson?" The big man remained silent, watchful, and Finlay gazed at the ground.

"Ride," Lee Banner snapped, and gestured with his rifle, and Gleeson's enraged eyes burned the skin of his face. Both men neck-reined their horses, and he watched them head south. When they were out of sight he rode back up the canyon and found Carol Drake and Watkins waiting beside the stream.

CAROL said quickly, "Is everything all right?" She was a tall girl, and possessed a graceful beauty. Her skin was tanned and her hair, under the Stetson, was the same tawny color as her eyes. She was, Lee Banner thought, too good for the likes of Watkins, for she had spirit and a mind of her own. Not many girls would shake convention by traveling any great distance with a fiancé, and Lee suspected it had been she who had insisted that Watkins make the trip with her, rather than the other way around.

She had been eager and cheerful from the first, but now he noticed that her question was troubled. He said, "Everything is fine," and rode over to take charge of the pack horse, quite certain in his mind that it was not, though he could not say why he felt this way.

As they rode on, he reflected that there were two sides to everything. He hadn't liked any of this, since she had written him about Charlie and that she was planning the trip to Colorado to visit her uncle's grave. He'd considered it a foolish venture, for he knew she hadn't seen Charlie since she was a child. And he'd been certain of her foolishness when, on her arrival at Pine, he had learned that the trip West had nearly drained her funds.

Watkins, on the other hand, had been quite pompous in his offer to shoulder any further expenses, an offer she had gently rejected.

She had ignored—or perhaps hadn't been aware of—the incident in Pine that still roused Lee Banner's disgust. It had happened the day of their arrival in the town. Passing a saloon on their way to the hotel, one in a group of idlers had made a sly and suggestive remark concerning Carol Drake's obvious charms. Lee Banner's gaze had marked the man instantly, after which he had met Watkins's embarrassed eyes.

Watkins had heard the remark and it had been his place to do something about it. He hadn't; he had only quickened his stride, and Carol hadn't appeared to notice. Rather than embarrass them both, Lee Banner had waited until they reached the hotel before excusing himself and returning to the saloon, where he found his man and beat him to a bloody pulp, a distasteful chore that decided him against helping the girl. He had no desire to spend time in Watkins's company.

"It's a good three-day ride," he had told her, "and there's nothing to see when you get there. Charlie was a prospector who lived from hand to mouth in a shack that's been all but torn down. He'd been dead a week when I found him, and I buried him deep and covered him with rocks to keep the wolves away. To visit the unmarked grave of a man you can't even remember is sheer foolishness."

"I was his closest relative and, from what he wrote, you were his best friend."

"I used to prospect with Charlie, but that was years ago, before I turned to ranching."

"Then won't you remember his friendship and guide us up there? I'll not be able to pay you much, but perhaps later—"

"It isn't that."

She'd looked at him with strange levelness for a moment. "Very well, Mr. Banner. Then I'll look for someone else to guide us. Failing that, we'll go by ourselves."

"You'll find yourselves lost ten miles from town. It's happened before this to people who thought they could walk in and out of those mountains. You'll wear out your horses and become too exhausted to walk, and in the end you'll starve. Is your reason for going worth the hardships?"

Her gaze, cool and speculative, was like

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a challenge. "Yes. I'm sorry I troubled you."

"I'll go," Lee Banner had said, knowing suddenly and completely that he must—perhaps because of Watkins, who was no man to lead her anywhere, let alone into the deep and woodsy mountains.

WHEN they pitched camp that night Lee Banner, as he had before, performed most of the chores, since Watkins had proved himself to be more of a hindrance than a help. The man was out of his element; it was in the safety of a drawing room, with servants at his beck and call, that he would appear at his best.

Carol Drake cooked supper, and they ate. Immediately afterward, Lee Banner saddled the mustang and spent an hour scouting the country. When he returned he found Watkins already rolled up in his blankets, while Carol, in a soft, loose robe, sat in front of the small tent they had brought for her. She had combed her hair out, and it flashed like spun bronze in the dying firelight.

She said, "Did you find what you were looking for?"

"No."

She watched him pack a stubby pipe and light it with a blazing twig, and her lips softened. "When do we get there, Lee?"

"About midmorning."

"Where is the shack? In another canyon?"

"Yes." He looked thoughtfully at her and she smiled, her eyes reflecting the light that flickered on the ground before them. She spoke suddenly.

"Tell me about Charlie. I was only six when he came East to pay us a visit, and all I can remember is a white beard and chuckling laughter."

Lee Banner puffed at his pipe, noting that Watkins was awake and watching them. "Charlie prospected most of the creeks in these mountains. He never struck it rich, but with him that wasn't the point; it was the seeking that gave it flavor and kept him going. That, and knowing he was a free soul and a burden to no man. Had he ever made a big strike, I think he would have been mildly disappointed, because he never cared about money and what it can buy.

"I asked him several times to move out to the ranch, but he always refused until one time he said he'd give it a try. He was seventy-six years old, and he stayed a week. One morning he was gone, and later I found him up here in yonder canyon. He'd built himself a shack, the first time I know of that he bothered with a roof other than a lean-to. He usually slept in the open.

"He was friendly and liked his fellow men, but he was too proud to accept help when he knew he might never be able to pay the debt. Unless you knew him, you'd have taken him for a down-at-the-heels oldster not worth a second glance, but he was all man and well worth his salt. I was proud to be his friend."

"I wish I'd known him," Carol said.

From his blankets, Watkins spoke with mild scorn. "Still, a man is a fool to spend his life running up and down mountains."

Carol gave him an odd look and said gently, "There was more to it than that, Ray. Did you hear what Lee said? It was the seeking. And don't we all, each in our own way, seek for something that always seems to elude us?"

"That's foolish," Watkins said testily, and turned restlessly in his blankets.

Carol said, "Lee, do you know why Charlie was killed?"

"Lone prospectors have always made good targets."

"How do you mean that?"

"There's a breed of men that will kill for a dollar. They spot a prospector and they watch him. If they think he has any dust panned to make it worth while, they'll kill him. Charlie wasn't the first victim."

She said quietly, "He did have some gold hidden away, Lee. And I think it's still there."

HE SAID brutally, "So that was your reason for coming here."

"I suppose it was," she said, flushing, "at least in the beginning. In his last letter he wrote that he'd uncovered a rich pocket and was still working it. He said

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that he was hiding the gold because he thought he was being watched. I didn't think anything about it until you wrote to say he'd been killed."

"Why didn't you tell me this before?"

"Well, to be honest with you, I saw no point in trusting someone I didn't know. I kept wondering why Charlie didn't tell you about the gold."

"I hadn't seen him since Christmas. And I walked away from spring roundup to look for him, because I learned in town that he hadn't been in for supplies in over a month."

Her flush deepened, but her gaze never wavered. "Then I'm sorry, Lee." She took a folded sheet of paper from the pocket of her robe. "This—" she began.

Watkins half rose and said angrily, "Don't show him that. There's no reason for it."

Lee Banner crossed over to him and said evenly, "Why not show it to me?"

Watkins stared at him and seemed to cringe in his blankets. "I didn't mean anything by that, Banner."

"The hell you didn't," Lee Banner said brutally, and walked away. But Carol followed and caught his arm.

"Please don't hold it against him, Lee."

"If you want your man in one piece, then tell him to check his tongue."

She regarded him with quick resentment. "You'd hold on to a grudge, wouldn't you?"

"No. But I want out of this, and the sooner the better. You'd better go to bed so we can get an early start."

"Wait," she said softly. "I want to thank you for what you said about Charlie a while ago."

"Thanks are not called for."

"I suppose not. Maybe it's that I feel a little ashamed for not thinking more about him. It was mostly the promise of the gold."

He said heavily, "Is the gold that important?"

"It doesn't seem so, now. But it did back East." Her candid gaze touched his face and moved away. "When one lives in a certain way, with certain people—"

"I wouldn't worry. You're marrying money, aren't you?"

"You can be cruel."

"I'm being honest," he said, and tapped his pipe out on the heel of his hand. "Go to bed." He turned back to the fire and his blankets, and she followed slowly.

AN HOUR after breaking camp next morning they entered a shallow canyon, the slopes of which were a tangle of live oak and stunted pines. Along its floor flowed a narrow stream. About a mile up it, Lee Banner handed Watkins the pack horse's lead rope. "Wait here," he said, and rode ahead, his rifle across the saddle horn.

He was in a stern frame of mind, and the reasons troubled him. Before this he had never thought seriously about any woman. Now the thought of Carol Drake married to Watkins filled him with a deep resentment.

But, as he rode on, this nagging concern was replaced by thoughts of Gleeson and the man called Finlay. He had seen no sign of them during his scout last night, no distant glow of their campfire. But that did not mean that they weren't in the vicinity, nor that they were to be trusted. And Lee Banner meant to take no chances.

A few minutes later he came upon Charlie's shack in a grassy clearing near the stream, and he stopped his horse and looked around. The shack itself, a small log structure with lean-to attached, looked as though it had been crushed by a giant hand. Behind it an earthen bank rose to a height of some thirty feet. Here and there rocks and small boulders stuck out of the bank. Sunlight filtered through a scatter of pines and lay broken upon the grassy yard.

Lee Banner rode forward and looked for sign, but he found nothing. Afterward he rode back after Watkins and the girl, and said bluntly, "Two riders followed us out of Pine. It might not mean anything, but you'd better not make straight for where that gold is hidden."

"It's in a dirt bank back of the shack," Carol said. "Charlie wrote that he scooped out a hollow and marked it with a cross."

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Lee Banner said nothing. He led the way back to the shack, and they dismounted and tied their horses. Watkins looked fearfully around, while Carol went immediately to the shack and looked inside.

"Why," she gasped, "they even dug up the floor and tore out the fireplace. And they ripped out part of the walls"

"They did a good job of looking," Lee Banner said. He pointed to a cairn, a long

pile of small boulders below the bank. "That's where I buried him."

Carol walked over and stood there a moment. She said softly, "Beneath pine trees and near a stream. He'd have liked that."

Lee Banner scarcely heard. He was keening the morning for odd sounds. A light wind rustled the trees, and the stream gurgled, but that was all. What roused him to danger was a rustle overhead. In the moment of raising his head the shot came, a vicious sound in the quiet. The slug struck the stock of his rifle and jerked the weapon from his hands.

"Don't move, Banner!" Gleeson stood poised on the edge of the bank, a wide grin on his bearded face. "Okay, Finlay!" he bellowed, and Finlay emerged from the brush across the stream and splashed over to them. While he kept them covered Gleeson slid down the bank, a wide grin of pleasure on his bearded face.

"Take off your gun, Banner, and quick."

Lee Banner moved his hands slowly and unbuckled his shell belt. "So it was you," he said. "You and Finlay."

Gleeson guffawed. "We knew the old fool'd been working a pocket upstream, so we sat back and let him clean it out before we moved in. Thought he had it cached in the shack, but he didn't. We should've worked him over to begin with. Our mistake, Banner. We won't make another."

HE LOOKED at the girl's pale, set face, then at Watkins. Shock had seized Watkins, and Gleeson marked it with a second guffaw.

"What's there to shake about, mister?" he said, and turned again to Carol, his eyes simmering with a wolfish desire. "They weren't lying about you," he breathed. "I'd be hard put to chose between you and the gold, if that was the way of it, which it ain't." He paused, then nudged his head at Watkins and said, "Okay, Finlay."

Finlay deliberately thumbed the hammer of his Colt. He said softly, "In the belly?"

Watkins made a hoarse sound of protest, and took a staggering side step, his face bloodless. He half screamed, "It's behind—"

Lee Banner said with thin irony, "Go ahead, Watkins. But they'll kill you just the same."

"Don't tell them, Ray," Carol said with shaky anger. "As long as they mean to kill us, don't give them that satisfaction."

"Not you, girlie." Gleeson grinned. "Not for a while, anyhow."

"Gleeson," Lee Banner said, "you won't get away with this. Someone will know that you two followed us out of town."

"Maybe. But they won't come looking for five or six days, and they won't find anything when they get here. And by that

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time we'll be long gone. All right, Finlay."

Watkins groaned as Finlay raised his gun, and his knees buckled. "It's in the bank behind the shack," he screamed, "back of a rock marked with a cross." His knees broke and he sat heavily, and dropped his head in his arms, his shoulders trembling.

Gleeson said with utter contempt, "And you were gonna marry him?" and looked at Carol.

"He at least does not shoot old man in the back."

Gleeson reddened angrily. He said, "Go look for it, Finlay." When Finlay had gone, he said, "I didn't shoot him. Finlay did it." Unable to meet her eyes, he turned on Watkins and said harshly, "Get on your feet and quit your blubbering!"

Watkins looked up quickly, and something painful rippled across his pale and ravaged face. Then he rose slowly and glanced at Carol. "I'm sorry." She said nothing, and he took a shaky breath. "You were never sure that I was right for you, so you insisted I make the trip. You wanted to see me in different surroundings. That was it, wasn't it?"

"Yes."

Watkins breathed, "Ah!" as though something had torn inside him. "Did you hear the remark that fellow made the day we arrived in Pine?"

She looked at him and said gently, "Yes, Ray."

He smiled painfully. "And did you know that Banner went back later and gave that fellow a whipping?" She nodded, and Watkins sighed. "If I had—" he began, then shook his head. "The point is I didn't." He glanced at Lee Banner. "You were the one."

Gleeson said, wickedly, "You can watch while I settle his hash, if that's what you want."

"I don't think so," Watkins said, and threw himself at the big man. Lee Banner, who had perceived something in that brief glance, a purpose perhaps, plunged forward as the shot split the silence. As Watkins went to his knees Lee Banner hurled him and smashed his fist into Gleeson's face. As the big man staggered, Lee Banner jerked the rifle from his hands and smashed the stock against the heavy jaw, then went to his knees as Finlay raised his gun.

THE shot was hurried and it was low, and the slug smashed into Gleeson, who lay sprawled in front of Lee.

Seeing this, Finlay hesitated and turned to run, but for the fragment of a second his narrow chest made a plain target. Lee Banner pumped two bullets into him.

Gleeson's eyes stared emptily at the sky and, seeing this, Lee Banner turned and found Watkins sitting up, Carol supporting him. He saw her shaky smile of relief and knew a dim hopelessness, a faint regret.

She said, "He's all right, Lee."

"You have got yourself a man," he said, and walked over to the pack horse. Afterward, Watkins's shoulder bandaged, he had a look at Finlay, and only then he noticed the round hole in the bank.

There were two lard cans in the hole, and they were heavy as lead. He removed a lid and looked at the coarse, sand-like grains mixed in with larger nuggets.

"Here's your inheritance," he told Carol. "I don't off-hand know what it's worth."

She did not look at the gold, but at him. Watkins looked at them both, a quiet acceptance on his handsome face. He spoke to her as though they were alone, saying, "There is no use hiding from what is there to see." She looked at him and he smiled. "I never believed a man could change, which is the reason I feared to leave my ivory tower. I said last night it was foolish, this seeking after something, but I know now that I've been seeking courage."

"You found it," Lee Banner said.

"For the first time in my life I know pride." Watkins smiled. "I knew at once that you had it, and I envied and resented you for having it, but I know now that it's not a thing to belittle."

Carol murmured, "Maybe we've all three sought for something and found it," but she did not sound confident.

"I think you're right," Lee said.

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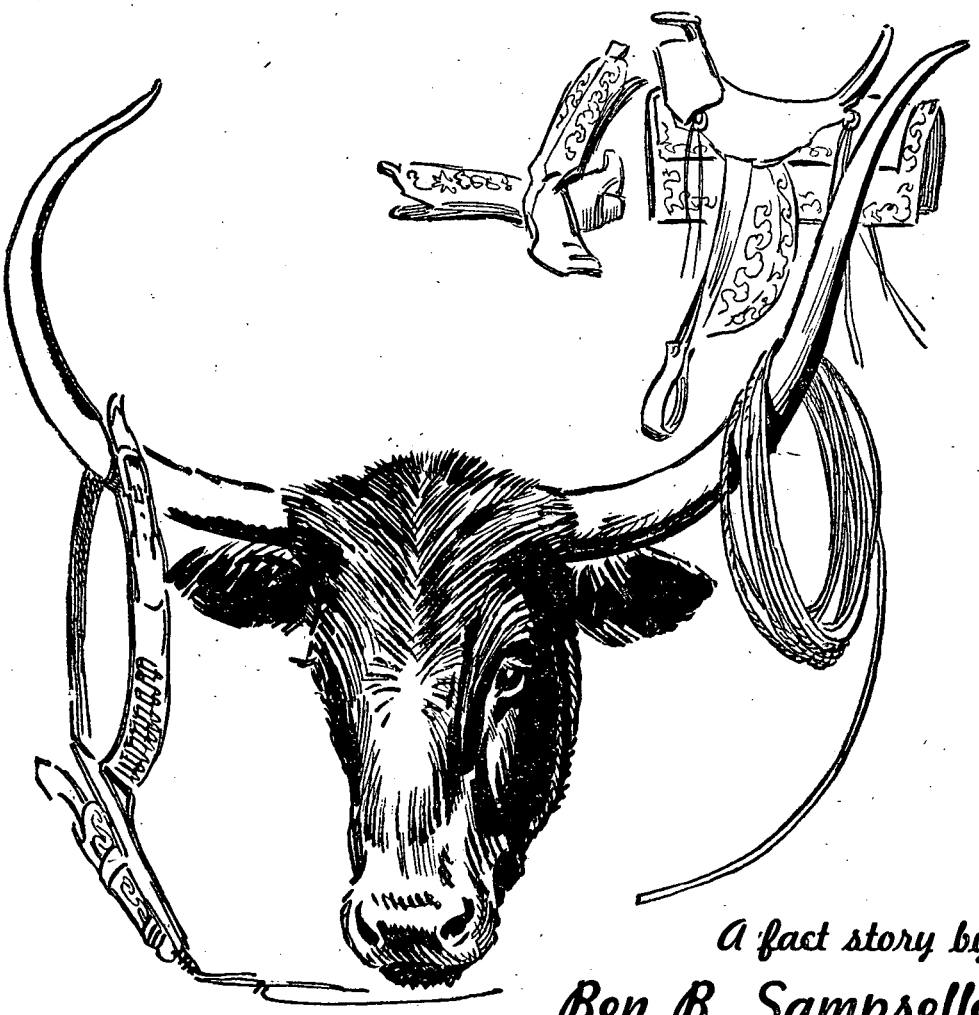
No Parity Payments Then



A fact story by
Ben B. Sampselle

IN TEXAS, following the War Between the States and into the early '70's, the cattlemen were plagued with the so-called "skinning wars." The cattlemen and their cattle were both skinned.

Long John Davos, a lean, laconic, brush-popper from the Neuces River section, had once screwed up his eyes in a sardonic twinkle while he characterized the period for a newcomer in the following way: "We 'bout lost everything; the critters lost their hides, the cattlemen lost their shirts, and us Texans durned near lost the cattle business."

This was before the lanky, drawling Texans started driving their herds up the trail to Abilene, Wichita, and Dodge City, for sale to Eastern shippers, and farther north into the Powder River country, Montana, and the Dakotas, for sale to

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ranchers who had pushed into these regions despite the protesting Sioux.

For more than a decade a longhorn on the hoof wasn't worth stealing. Meat was so plentiful, and the markets so far away, that a steer's hide was worth more than the steer itself. While the meat went begging, hides could be put to a thousand uses.

"By Gum, there ain't nothing much a man can't make out of a cow hide," Long John was apt to say. "Boots, ammunition belt, chaps, and that forty-foot reata—all came from a hide. I ride on leather all day, and my bed tick is slung on whang strings. On the fancier side, he would continue, "there ain't nothing that'll stand the pressure like a whang string for lacing a stout lady's Sunday corset."

Hide and tallow plants were set up to gather these two readily marketable products. The two largest plants were at Quintana and Brazoria on the Brazos River. Cattle by the thousands were driven to these "shucking factories." A great many ranchers sold their entire herds to them—all they could gather from the brush. Outlaw bands killed them where they grazed and skinned them for their hides.

At the Quintana and Brazoria plants the cattle were skinned, the tallow rendered, and the meat thrown into the Brazos River. The catfish in the stream gorged themselves on choice steaks, and a thousand Western windies were born about the enormous size they attained and their ferocity to man or beast that ventured too near the river.

DURING this period bands of lawless Mexicans roamed the region between the Rio Grande and the Nueces Rivers. They rode among the far-flung herds, cutting the tendons of the cattles' hind legs with their machetes. When they had hamstrung as many as they could handle on a particular day, they cut their throats and skinned them. The carcasses were left for the carrion crows, the buzzards, and the coyotes.

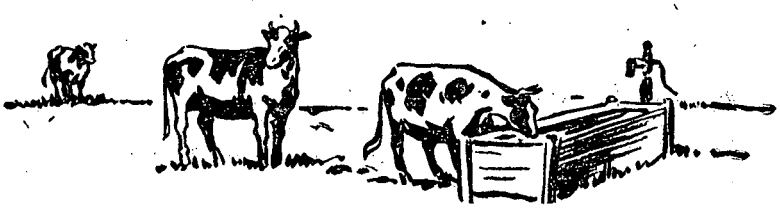
Other hide rustlers, mainly American, used a different technique. They burned off the range grass. The cattle ate what little grass and green brush was left within reach of water, then faced starvation. A cold wet spell finished them off. Men flocked out from the nearby towns with skinning knives and carried off the hides.

Long John Davos and his neighbors were a hardy lot, and they survived; so did the longhorns. The cattlemen pulled into their shells for the duration, and the longhorns went deeper into the catclaw and prickly pear jungles of the Big State. Neither of them waxed fat, but when the time was right they came out with a bellow.

With the coming of the rails to Abilene, and an offer of fifteen to twenty dollars a head for all the cattle that could be hazed up the trails, the Texas cattlemen saw a double-barreled bonanza dead ahead. Men like Long John started slapping their irons on every longhorn in sight, something they hadn't bothered to do before.

Long John once summed up the situation like this: "It sure beats hell out of me how things can change so sudden-like. Last year the wrappings around a steer were worth a dollar and the rest was just buzzard meat. This year the meat's worth twenty dollars on the hoof at Abilene, with the wrappings thrown in free for nothing. You figure it out."

Then, with a wave of his bony hand, Long John was off to slap his Box D iron on a couple of steers he had spied running in the brush.



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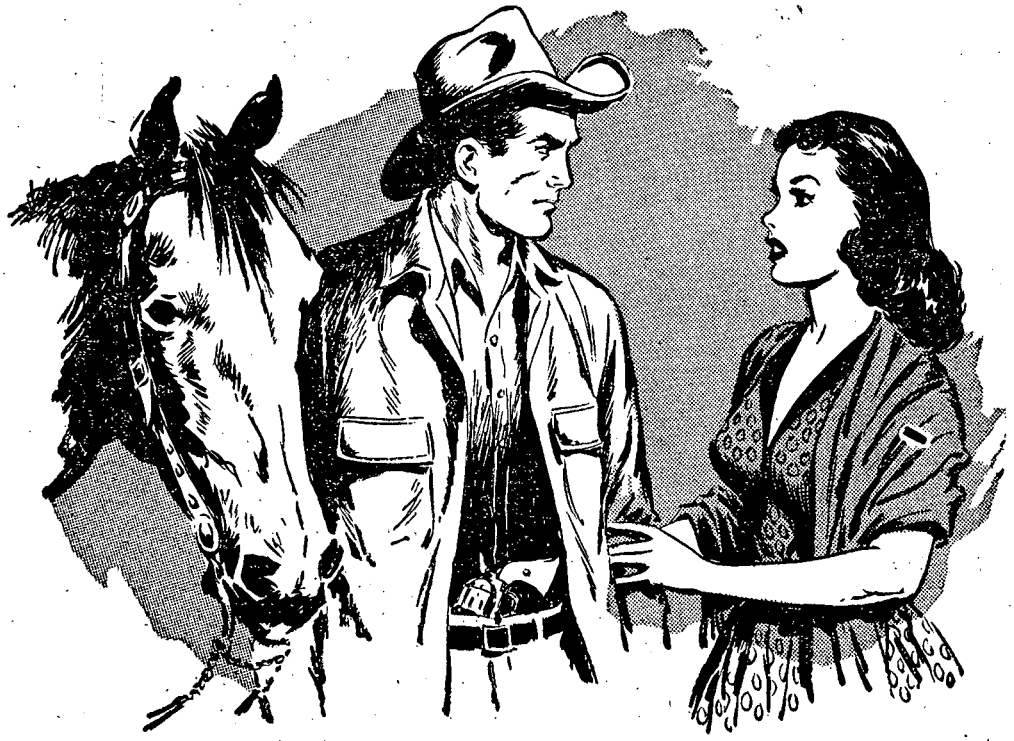

"Doesn't a promise to your fiancee mean anything?" Leda asked

The Trouble at Three-Mile

By Jonathan Craig

WHEN Lou Harper heard the first of the pistol shots he was upstairs at the mercantile, taking down a new bolt of calico from a shelf in the stock room. By the time he'd run down the stairs and across the store to the boardwalk, the shooting was over and two men lay dead in the half frozen slush of Three-Mile's main street.

People were pouring from doorways along both boardwalks now, while down the street, almost hidden by the shifting curtain of the swirling snow, three riders raced out of town on the branch road that led up into the Squaw Mountains.

Lou stepped out into the slush and helped three other men carry the bodies into the mercantile.

One of the men glanced at Lou. "You see it?"

"No," Lou said.

"It was the Strode brothers. They robbed the bank. These two happened to be crossing the street at the wrong time,

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A MAN DOES what he has to do . . . . even if his common sense tells him he's a fool . . . .

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and Al Strode gunned them down just for the pure hell of it."

Lou looked down at the dead men. They had been friends of his, men he'd known most of his thirty years.

"Where's the marshal?" he asked.

The other man laughed bitterly. "A *marshal,* you call him? Well, such law as we got is over at the bank. He was there the whole time they was cleaning out the safe, and he never made a move. He just stood there and watched the Strodes make off with the life savings of almost everybody in the valley."

Lou took a deep breath and let it out slowly, glancing about him at the faces of the men who had crowded into the mercantile. Almost instinctively his fingers went up to touch the spot on his vest where, until four months ago, he had worn the star. Then he pushed through the crowd and crossed the snow-swept street to the bank.

HE FOUND Marshal Cass Bailey talking to a white-faced teller.

"You getting up a posse, Cass?" he asked.

Cass Bailey turned slowly to stare at him. He was a big man, bigger even than Lou, with pale eyes and the scarred, hammered-down features of a man partial to alley fighting.

"In a snow blizzard?" he said. "What's the use?"

"The snow works both ways," Lou said. "It'd slow them down just as much as it would us."

"Not up in those hills, it wouldn't. The Strodes know that country like they know the back of their hand. We wouldn't see them until we were almost on top of them. And then it'd be too late. They could pick us off one by one."

"There are two men dead, Cass," Lou said softly. "Two men dead, and a couple hundred others robbed of every dollar they have in the world."

Bailey shrugged. "No use sending live men after dead ones," he said.

Lou glanced at the silver-mounted .44's thonged low against Bailey's thighs, and then at the star pinned to his shirt.

"You and me, then, Cass," he said. "Just the two of us could do it."

Bailey shook his head, frowning. "No."

"Then deputize me. I'll do it alone."

Bailey spat on the floor. "Maybe you should have kept this job, storeman," he said. "You're so all-fired brave. You trying to make me look bad?"

"No," Lou said. "But a bank's been robbed and two men are dead. If you won't get up a posse, and if you don't want to go yourself, then I mean to see what I can do about it."

Bailey stepped close. "You trying to make out I'm yellow, Harper?"

"Deputize me," Lou said. "Those Strodes are getting farther away every minute."

"No, damn it!"

Lou nodded. "All right. I'd rather do it legal, but I'm damned if I'll beg you to let me." He turned and left the bank, and then waded quickly through the slush back to the mercantile.

He found a trusted old-timer and gave him the key to the front door.

"Try to clear everybody out of here, Charley," he said. "Then lock the door and take the key over to Miss Leda at the hotel. Tell her I'm—" he paused, "just tell her I'll be back as soon as I can."

The old man looked at him knowingly. "Seems like that's something you should tell Miss Leda yourself," he said.

Lou didn't answer him. The old-timer was right, of course, but Lou knew what Leda's reaction was certain to be, and he didn't feel up to facing her. He turned and strode toward his living quarters at the rear of the mercantile.

FIVE minutes later he had changed to high-heeled boots and a blanket-lined horsehide jacket and was hurrying along the boardwalk toward the livery stable. He had stuck his .45 into the waistband of his levis, to keep it warm and ready for action, and the pockets of the jacket were bulging with extra shells.

He had just finished cinching the saddle on his horse when he heard soft, quick steps on the packed earth floor behind him.

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"Lou!" Leda's voice said. "What do you think you're doing?"

He tightened the cinch a little more, then straightened up to face her.

"I just went past the store," she said. "Charley told me you were going after the Strodes." She came close to him and tilted her head back to look up at him. "You can't do it, Lou! You just can't!" She was a remarkably pretty girl, with tiny, even features and wide-set blue eyes. The melting flakes of snow in her blue-black hair glistened like diamond dust. "You just can't!" she said again.

"I've got no choice," he said. "Marshal Bailey won't get up a posse, and he won't go himself." He shrugged. "That leaves me."

"But why you? You promised me, Lou. When I got Dad to take you on at the store, you promised . . ."

"I know," he told her. "And I thought I meant it. I *did* mean it—at the time."

Her blue eyes seemed almost black now. "How can you do this, when we're to be married in less than a week?"

He said nothing.

"Lou! Listen to me!"

"I'm listening."

"Can't you think of me for once? What about the store? Do I have to remind you that Dad and I are depending on you to take it over after we're married?" She put her hands on her hips, breathing rapidly. "Doesn't a promise to your fianceé mean anything to you? When I finally made you see the light about that stupid, dangerous marshal's job, and you resigned, you said you'd never even wear a gun again. We had such great plans, Lou . . . and now look at you!"

"I reckon I'd better be on my way, Leda," he said. "I know how you must feel, but sometimes a man thinks he knows what he's going to do, and then when the times comes he does something different." He looked straight down into the unblinking, angry eyes. "A man does what he has to do, Leda, even if it isn't what somebody else figures is best for him."

She turned her back on him and stamped away toward the big double doors.

"Leda," he called after her.

She whirled around toward him. "Either you stay right here in Three-Mile, Lou Harper, or I'll . . . I'll . . ." Suddenly she covered her face with her hands and ran out of the livery stable.

He stared after her a moment, feeling a sickening sense of emptiness seeping through him; then he took his horse's reins and led him toward the street.

THE driving snow filled in horse tracks almost as soon as they were made, and Lou was well up into the hills before he cut his first sign. Even then he wasn't sure, until he dismounted and examined the tiny broken twigs on the trailside bush. They were too far above the ground to have been snapped by anything other than a man on horseback.

Up ahead, the narrow trail ended in a transverse ridge; to his left, the face of the hill rose sheer and high, and to his right there was nothing but space and a hundred-yard drop to the jagged rocks below.

He had just remounted, and was urging his horse ahead, when he saw the tiny gray figure on the ridge, and caught the dull glint of light on a rifle barrel. A shot rang out at the same instant he threw himself out of the saddle. He heard the soft, meaty impact of a bullet meeting flesh, and the horse staggered and lurched toward the edge of the precipice. Lou felt a sudden yank at his leg and realized his foot was caught in the stirrup. He fought desperately to free himself as the horse fell heavily to the snow, his hind quarters now out of sight as he slid slowly over the edge.

Another bullet ploughed into the snow inches from Lou's face as, with a last desperate kick, he tore his foot loose from the stirrup and the horse disappeared over the side. For one nightmarish moment, he lost his footing on the edge of the precipice and thought he was going to follow the horse to his death on the rocks below. But his flailing hands caught in some bushes, and he flattened himself down behind them.

He lay there panting, straining his eyes at the ridge up ahead. The man with the rifle was still there, the gun cradled in his

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arms now. And then, through the muffling snow, Lou heard the man laugh and watched him turn away. A moment later he was out of sight.

The rifleman's visibility had been hampered by the snow, Lou knew, and when he had seen the horse go over the side he must have assumed that Lou had gone with him. He lay there behind the bushes another ten minutes to make certain the man didn't come back to take another look, and then he scrambled over to the side of the trail nearest the face of the hill and started forward again.

If the Strodes thought he had been the only one following them, and that he was dead, they might call a halt about now to rest their horses, Lou reasoned. If they did, then there was still a chance that he might get the drop on them. But if they didn't stop now, he'd have to turn back.

Very slowly, still hugging the wall of rock beneath the overhang, he worked his way to the ridge on which the rifleman had stood. He crouched behind a pile of shale, listening carefully. There was no sound. He let a full minute go by before he started his climb to the top.

When he reached the crest of the ridge he saw that there was another ridge just beyond it, about the same height as the one he was on, and running right along with it in the same big curve. He hadn't been up this way in years, and for a while he had forgotten this particular double ridge.

And now he could hear them. They were just beyond the top of the second ridge. He recognized Ernie Strode's sardonic laugh and Buck's hacking cough, but he waited in vain for Al's whiskey-burred voice.

His hand moved to his waistband to check his gun.

The gun was no longer there.

HE MUST have lost it when he'd jumped from his horse, he knew. And there was no use going back to look for it. He was certain it had gone over the side of the precipice; otherwise he would have seen it lying in the snow. He'd scanned the area carefully.

Then, far back down the trail behind him, he heard what sounded like the rumble of thunder. He turned in time to see a good twenty yards of the trail split away from the hill and fall out into space.

He cursed silently. There was no way back now. It wasn't at all unusual for parts of the Squaw Mountains to split away during the winter, and most folks avoided them for that very reason. Ice accumulated between the rocks until the first prolonged cold spell caused it to swell enough to cause a cleavage.

He made himself as small as possible behind an outcropping of rock, knowing that the sound of the rockslide would bring at least one of the Strodes to the top of the ridge to investigate. A moment later he heard a man's boots in the loose shale above him, and Ernie Strode's laugh, and then the boots went away again.

He lay there, thinking about Leda and the mercantile, and about what a damned fool he'd been to start out after the Strodes alone. Anyone else would have considered himself the luckiest man in the world to have both Leda and a good business coming his way, he knew. And yet he'd been happier when he'd been marshal, with no responsibilities other than his duty to the star.

And now, he reflected, he was no longer sheriff, and by trying to be a one-man posse he had gone back on his word to Leda.

An hour passed while he waited for the sounds of the Strodes' leaving. The snow had died down now, but the wind was stronger, and it had been steadily growing colder. If he stayed as he was, Lou knew, he would freeze. He was already beginning to feel relaxed and sleepy.

He moved cautiously to the top of the ridge again, then down it and up the incline of the second ridge.

The second ridge bent back on itself, forming an oval wall around a deep depression in the rocks. The Strodes had heaped small stones together to form a stove, and they were hunkered around it, their horses to one side of them to break the wind.

They were in no hurry now, Lou rea-

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soned. Chances were they'd wait out the wind right where they were. There wasn't another place as well protected within fifteen miles.

He was trapped, he knew. With the trail gone behind him, and three killers in front of him, he could move neither way.

He waited, while numbness spread up his legs and along his arms.

It came to him then—an idea that his mind at once rejected as too ridiculous for even a second thought. But as the time wore on, and the symptoms of freezing grew more pronounced, the idea returned again. And, finally, he realized he had no other choice. Death waited for him anyway; it was better to give the idea a chance than to just lie there and feel his life freeze away. He slid down to the foot of the ridge, where the wind had swept most of the snow away from the rocks, and began hacking at the scrub bushes that grew there. None of the twigs he collected were any larger around than his little finger, but they were dry, and most of them broke off in his hands without much knife work.

He worked furiously until he had gathered a good-sized pile of the twigs. Then he clawed around in the shale for handfuls of dead mountain grass. Stripping off his leather jacket, he transferred the extra .45 shells he had put in the pockets to his levis. And then, fashioning the jacket into a kind of sack, he filled it with the twigs and grass and climbed back up the side of the ridge.

He listened, sweating now in spite of the icy blast of the wind. He could still hear the Strodes. And now Al Strode's hoarse whiskey voice had joined the others. He knelt and scooped broken shale together until he had a mound with a deep crater in the top. He filled the crater with dried grass and twigs and moved along the ridge about three yards and did the same thing again. He kept this up until he had a dozen of the craters, following the curve of the ridge and just beneath the top of it.

It has to work, he told himself. It *has* to.

WHEN he had finished shaping the last of the craters and filled it with grass and twigs, he set fire to it. Then he hurried along the line of craters, lighting the grass in each of them. The Strodes wouldn't see the smoke, he knew; the wind would whip it close to the rocks and disperse it so much that none of it would appear over the crest of the ridge.

When he had set the last of the fires, he retrieved his jacket and lay down behind the outcropping of rocks to wait.

The roar of the first shell exploding was the most beautiful sound Lou Harper had ever heard. It set off the other shells in the crater, so that there were several explosions from each, just a split second apart. Then the second crater erupted, and from then on the effect was all he could have hoped for. It was exactly as if the oval ridge had been surrounded by at least a dozen men, all of whom had started to fire at a given signal.

Just as soon as the shells in the last crater went off, Lou yelled, "You, down there! You Strodes! That was just a sample. The next time, we'll blow your bellies out! Throw away your guns and stand clear of each other!"

He inched himself up to the crest of the ridge and looked down at them. They were standing there as if frozen, not one of them making the slightest move.

A few seconds either way could make all the difference, Lou knew. He had to get them to shuck their guns before their brains began to function. Right now they were numbed with surprise and disbelief.

"Surrender, and you'll get a fair trial," he yelled. "Try to fight, and we'll shoot you in the legs and leave you here to freeze. Make a choice, and make it fast!"

The three men hesitated another moment, then unhooked their gunbelts.

This was the instant he had dreaded, had tried to put from his mind. He started down toward them, his heart pounding harder with every step. The Strodes were paying little attention to him. Their interest seemed to be scattered along the ridge where they had heard what they thought were the sounds of many guns.

Lou stooped down and lifted Al Strode's six-gun, and with it he took the first full breath he'd taken since he started his walk down the slope of the ridge.

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Lou motioned with the gun toward the horses. "Get aboard," he said shortly. "I'm riding one of them, so a couple of you will have to double up. With the trail gone back there, we're going to have to go back to Three-Mile by way of Lobo Pass." He prodded Al Strode with the gun. "That means an extra ten miles of cold riding, so let's get moving."

It was nearing midnight by the time Lou Harper got his prisoners safely locked away in the hoosegow and finished telling and retelling his story to the jubilant townsfolk. When he finally broke away and headed for the hotel to see Leda, he found his steps dragging. He had been a fool, he told himself for the hundredth time, a mighty big fool.

She was waiting for him in the lobby, just inside the street door.

He took off his hat, not looking at her. "Leda," he said, "I—"

"Thank heavens!" she whispered, and then she was in his arms.

His throat felt strangely dry. "I had to do it, Leda," he said. "There was something inside me made me do it."

"I know," she said softly. "I never realized until today just how much that star had always meant to you." She pressed close to him, holding him tight. "I've been so selfish, Lou—so terribly selfish. I was trying to make you over into what I thought a husband should be. I was even more worried about your keeping your promise to me than I was about the danger you were into." She paused, and her voice grew even softer. "But the only thing I could think about all the time you were gone was *you*. Not the store, nor our marriage, nor the promises you made—not anything but you!"

He held her out at arm's length and grinned at her. "A man does what he has to do, Leda," he said. "I reckon he'd a heap rather think of himself as a man *and* a husband, than just a husband. They're just plain contrary that way."

She laughed, and the sound went through him like music.

"You're back safe, and that's all that matters," she said.

And, looking deep into the blue eyes, he knew that it was.

KNOW YOUR WEST

(Answers to the questions on page 93)

1. 1897.
2. Arizona.
3. The short string that laces the legs of chaps together at the waist in front should be weak enough to break if it gets hung up on the saddle horn on a bucking bronc or otherwise caught in the riding gear.
4. True — but Studebaker wagons — "Prairie Schooners"—not Studebaker automobiles.
5. Forest Reserves.
6. Because of Chisum's earmark, made by cutting into the top of the ear deep enough to let the ear flap down like the ears of an Angora goat.
7. The Sierra Nevada Range.
8. As sheriff, Texas Ranger and ranch manager.
9. Colorado, though he operated some also in Wyoming.
10. Florida.

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OUT OF THE CHUTES

AUTUMN in New York," is the name of a song, as everyone knows, and it's a season that deserves to be celebrated in song. The sky is blue, the air pleasantly nippy. The summer's heat is gone from the pavements, and they feel almost springy underfoot.

But best of all, as far as the homesick Westerner is concerned, is that the rodeo is in town. A displaced rancher we know got special permission to visit the vast basement of Madison Square Garden where the stock is stabled, and he felt right at home for the first time in months.

It was early in the morning, still dark and too soon to know whether the day would be fine for the rodeo parade down to City Hall. But already the stock hands were busy, feeding over 500 head of bulls, calves and horses, and sweeping out the stalls.

The rancher sniffed the air appreciatively, enjoying the scent of timothy, of oats and of animals.

"You could walk into every perfume shop on Fifth Avenue," he said, "and you couldn't find a better smell than that."

He didn't care much for the noise, however. It was bedlam, for every sound made by men and animals bounced off the concrete walls. And every few minutes a recording on the public address system repeated, "You are now in a no smoking area."

No one thought of breaking that rule—172 tons of timothy, 63 tons of bedding straw and 128 tons of oats could make a real lively blaze.

Upstairs in the arena, everything was ready for the show, which was still some 14 hours away.

Ninety tons of dirt had been spread on the floor, where only a few days before a shining surface of ice had gleamed for the ice show.

Once, by the way, we referred in these columns to tanbark as the stuff used underfoot at the Garden Rodeo. We were sternly corrected. It's not tanbark but good rich loam.

You can figure how rich it is when we tell you that the same dirt is used year after year for the rodeo. And where it's kept between shows is a strictly guarded secret, because city people would steal it for their terrace gardens if they knew where to find it.

It was still an hour or two before parade time, and many of the cowboys were exercising their horses. Round and round and round they circled. One mount was carrying double, but he wasn't overloaded. Champion Harry Tompkins had his eight-month-old son in the saddle. Mark was all dressed up in levis and boots, and was gurgling with delight.

We hailed Harry as he went past us. "How do you expect Mark to learn to walk," we asked him, "when you carry him around like this?"

"Plenty of time for walking," Harry shouted back, "*after* he's learned to ride."

We went out to 49th Street where the parade was slowly beginning to assemble. The sun was creeping over the tall buildings by now, and it promised to be a fine day. Eighth Avenue was wet, though, from a street sprinkling truck which had just gone through, so the cowboys and cowgirls were lifting the horses' hoofs to make sure the grip of the shoes would be good.

One by one they threw saddles over their mounts, adjusted straps and buckles carefully, tested stirrups, arranged the reins.

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It was nearly time to start the trip downtown.

Amid whistles and shouts and orders, everyone got into the saddle, and after a few moments of complete confusion ranks began to form.

Then Roy Rogers and Dale Evans arrived, looking perfectly splendid in bright Western outfits. Trigger and Trigger, Jr., looked splendid too, their coats shining and their saddles gleaming.

We noticed that Roy was packing a pistol. "It's for my trick shooting act," he explained to us, "but I have to get a permit for it just the same. The only reason I wear it on the streets is because the kids expect a cowboy to have his shooting iron handy."

Some mounted policemen had been standing around, in case any trouble developed. None did, and it was our private opinion that the cowboys could have handled it if it had.

And now some motorcycle cops arrived to lead the parade and to keep the streets clear for the marchers. The crowds on Eighth Avenue were already lining the sidewalks, the band struck up, and the parade started off.

All along the way—it's about sixty blocks down and five or six across town—people clapped and cheered. Roy and Dale bowed and waved, some of the cowboys twirled their loops and some of the more educated horses pranced and reared.

In City Hall Square, the Mayor and other city officials came out to greet the cowboys. There was more cheering, a few short speeches of welcome, and then everyone trooped back sixty-five blocks to Madison Square Garden. The rodeo season had officially opened in New York, though the show didn't start till that night.

We can tell you that 196 cowboys entered the show this year, but we can't tell you who won, because as we write this the show is in full swing. Some famous names are in the lead, however, for a big share of that $100,000 purse: Casey Tibbs, Tater Decker, Deb Copenhaver and Toots Mansfield. In the next issue we'll tell you how these and other top-hands made out.

We go to the show every chance we get, and being rodeo reporters we get in free, of course. But we do feel a little uneasy about our passes ever since we noticed an old sign that hangs in the Madison Square Garden box-office. It reads as follows:

Free Passes

In those days there were no passes.
Search the Scripture:

Thou shalt not pass—Numbers, xx, 18
Though they roar, yet they cannot pass.—Jeremiah, v, 22.

Suffer not a man to pass.—Judges, iii, 28.

None shall pass.—Isaiah, iv, 10.

There shall no strangers pass.—Amos, iii, 17.

No man may pass through because of the beasts.—Ezekiel, xiv, 15.

So he paid the fare thereof and went.—Jonah, i, 3.

It's an old sign and very dusty. And it certainly doesn't stop anyone from asking.

We've got one more little sidelight on rodeo time in New York.

At the Hotel Belvedere where most of the cowboys stay, there's also a troupe of ballet dancers from London, who are putting on a very arty production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at the Metropolitan Opera House. The gals from Britain and the men from the American West don't have much in common, but they get along fine—both being very much impressed by the talents of the other.

However, the girls apparently prefer the scent of the Fifth Avenue perfume shops to the earthy smell of a ranch. Somebody asked one of the dancers if the cowboys ever brought their horses into the lobby of the hotel.

"No," she replied thoughtfully, "but sometimes when you walk in and take a deep breath you have the feeling that there must be some horses lurking behind the potted palms."

Adios,

THE EDITORS

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WHOM SHALL I MARRY?

by Professor MARCUS MARI

MAN OF AQUARIUS
JAN. 21 — FEB. 19

DURING 1954 the men born under the powerful sign of Aquarius will celebrate their birthdays with a number of happenings that shaped the West. One is the birthday into the Union of the territory of Kansas, that became a State on Jan. 29th, 1861.

It is odd to note that Oregon's birthday is even earlier—Feb. 14th, 1859—inasmuch as that land is so much further west of Kansas. And Colorado, under the Organic Act of Territories, celebrates its birthday during the month of February, being born in 1861.

Men of Aquarius are individualists; they do not attempt to conform to the pattern of the men about them. They are free and they are proud, and their feelings toward their loved ones are profound and moving forces in their lives. They will suffer almost any indignity or hardship for their nearest and dearest.

Their sign, the Water Bearer, ruled by Uranus, gives them constancy and steadiness. Sudden impulses and unreasoned behavior have little part in their lives because they are inclined to think before they speak or act, and strive to acquire wisdom so that their ideas can be relied upon.

Aquarius men have a hard-headed belief in personal freedom, but they have no tolerance at all with moral slackness or ineptitude, and should take this into consideration when choosing a mate for life. They need—and give in return—good-natured solidity.

You may receive a personal reading by sending this coupon to Professor Mari in care of Ranch Romances, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. ENCLOSE STAMPED AND SELF-ADDRESSED ENVELOPE. (Canadians enclose three cents instead of stamp.)

Name..... Sex.....

Address .....

.....

Exact date of birth: Year..... Month..... Date of Month.....1-28-55

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Decision at Sundown

By Michael Carder

He brushed past her and peered guardedly down into the street

PART THREE

ALLISON had seen the riders come into town and go into the saloon, and it had given him a pretty grim feeling. Reinforcements for Kimbrough, he thought. Then the saloon doors had swung open and the red-haired man who headed the bunch

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called to him reassuringly, and the cowhands took up positions directly across from the saloon.

But, keyed as he was, sniffing a trap again, and with Sam's death weighing on him, Allison was getting too desperate to be reassured. The whole thing had gone wrong—blown up, *fracasado*. Only his determination to go through to the end after Kimbrough, to shoot him down, was pressing and real.

And then, while he was mulling over this new development, Swede Hobson and a gawky-looking young gunman came from the saloon and stepped down into the dust of the street.

Hobson said something to his young companion, who quickly fanned out across the street.

The way that young hombre wore his guns, low, and the masklike set of his face, almost brought a smile to Allison's own face.

"Allison!" Swede's voice came at him. "Step out of that barn and call me yellow again!"

A swift excitement shot along Allison's nerves. Maybe it was a trap; maybe it wasn't. But he'd never get a better break than this—*if* those men across the way were, as they'd said, on his side. If he waited any longer, sooner or later a raft of gunmen would come after him, fill this place with lead, and he'd have no chance at all. And he could handle the two out there in the street, if all the others kept their dib out.

Bent low, he raced back to his horse and swung the Greener off the pommel.

As he reached the front again Hobson was jeering, thinking Allison had cooled off.

"What's the matter? Who's yellow now? Come out and I'll drive that bluff down your throat!"

Allison broke the Greener, looked to the loads, then closed the breech and pulled back both hammers. Quick and grim, he moved out into the street. He looked at the Swede and the kid, said, thin and tight, "Come on, make your play," then started walking deliberately toward the gunmen.

THE STORY SO FAR:

BART ALLISON has found TATE KIMBROUGH, who ran away with and later caused the death of Bart's wife BELLE. Bart breaks up Tate's wedding to LUCY SUMMERTON by announcing his intention to kill Tate, then he and his sidekick SAM RIDGLEY hole up to await the appointed hour, sundown.

Lucy's father, CHARLES SUMMERTON, who has been blackmailed by Kimbrough into forcing the marriage, is now unable to get Lucy to continue her engagement to Tate. Instead Lucy confesses to her old friend DOC STORROW her interest in Allison. Meanwhile Sam tells Bart to forget his obsession for revenge—Belle was no good. Sam and Bart quarrel, Sam leaves, and is shot down by Kimbrough's henchmen SWEDE HOBSON and LITTLE SPANISH. The latter is injured, but Bart challenges Swede to a gun duel. MORELY CHASE of the Cross C, who hates Kimbrough, arrives in time to make sure the fight is fair. . . .

THEY came forward slowly, hands near pistol-butts. Allison saw their expressions as they caught sight of the Greener, and he knew they were thinking they would reach effective range before he did, and that they'd have more lead to throw. He had gambled on their thinking that. He didn't worry too much about the young gunman now, off to one side, taking his cue from Swede. Both of them were wire-taut.

Allison held the barrel of the Greener inclined a little toward the ground. Gravely he watched the two men, himself cool and steady. He had to make them shoot too soon and too fast or he was a goner.

The distance came down to fifty yards, forty. He saw Swede's face plainly, saw the man's eyes flick sideward. It was coming now.

Suddenly Allison broke and ran three paces forward. Even as he took the first step, Swede's hand streaked for his gun. It came up bellowing, and lead screamed past Allison. As he went to his knees he half saw the kid open fire, wild and fast.

Then the Greener went, *Whoom-m-m!*

Swede Hobson let out a grunt and pulled high on his toes against the weight that slammed into him. His gun fell, he clapped both hands to his middle and pitched into the dust. Bart swung the bar-

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rel instantly and brought it in line with Swede's helper.

He was pressing the other trigger when the young fellow threw his gun from him, screaming, "No! Don't shoot, Texas!"

He stood there ashen-faced, looking first at Swede, then at hard gray eyes peering at him down the Greener's barrel.

"I got nothing against you, Texas—honest! I didn't want to come—they made me! Don't shoot me!"

Allison slowly rose from his crouch, and let the hammer back down. Someone on the porch called out, "He's a liar, Texas. He made plenty of brag in the saloon. Let him have it."

Allison said to Curly drily, "You aren't dry behind the ears yet. Go climb on your horse and get out of town. This is no game for boys to play, and for damn few men."

The scathing contempt of his tone hit Curly Young as hard as a bullet could have done. The Cross C bunch guffawed. In a voice so low that Allison could hardly hear him, Curly Young said, "Thank you kindly, Texas," and looked at Swede Hobson sprawled in the dust. Shaking a little, he turned away.

"When you carry a gun, you can expect to have to use it," Allison said pointedly, and Curly nodded and walked toward his horse.

There were a couple of jeering calls from the Cross C bunch, but he didn't seem to notice them. He didn't seem in any hurry. He was like a man from whom some deep impatience had suddenly gone, leaving him settled in his mind and sober. He turned his horse into the street and rode out of town without looking back.

As Allison saw Doc leave the bunch on the saloon porch and come toward Swede Hobson, he felt an ugly, thin kind of sickness come into him. He still held the Greener, but the people on both sides of the street were just watching him.

He started easing cagily back toward the door of the livery when a Cross C puncher yelled, "Watch out!" and a gun cracked. As Allison swung about he saw a couple of men firing at him from the doorway of the stable. They had closed in on him from the rear, and he was whipsawed. Automatically he shot the other barrel off at them, and his glance raced wildly around the street, looking for escape. The only thing he saw was the door leading up to Doc's office, standing open.

He bent low and raced for it. Bullets were catching at his bootheels as he reached it, slammed inside and closed and bolted it, then ran three or four steps upward before he halted. He stood there, panting and cursing.

Now he was in for it. They'd got him away from the horses, and his carbine was over there, too. He had no more slugs for the Greener. He was down to his sixgun, and he was trapped here on the second story of Doc's place.

Still, there must be some other way out of here, he thought and went up the stairs three at a time. At the top in the dark hallway he saw a door. Throwing the door open violently, he barged in.

Then he pulled up. Lucy Summerton stood there—a sobering surprise. She was regarding him somberly, not frightened, but oddly curious. For perhaps four seconds they looked at one another. Then he closed the door.

MOMENTARILY Tate Kimbrough could not believe his eyes as he saw Swede Hobson fall, saw Curly Young ride out of town. Then he saw the Texan make his escape once more and dash safely into Doc's doorway down the street.

Looking out the window, his breathing fast and shallow, panic spread all through him. His men were out on the walk, standing under the board awning, and their faces were sober and undecided. Suddenly he wheeled and faced the half-dozen still in the saloon with him.

"Why didn't you at least lift a gun?" he demanded hoarsely. "That murderer got away and you didn't raise a finger!"

One of them said thinly, "Fellow like that deserves a break. Two to one is plenty, even in this town."

"So that's the way you feel about it."

The man said, "Well, I'm not hankering

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to start a ruckus with the Cross C, Tate. They've bought chips on the Texan's side."

Kimbrough read their growing indifference, and said quietly, accusingly, "You've pulled out on me."

The silence held for a moment before the man answered, "Tate, you called it."

"But you're *my men!*" Kimbrough exploded.

"The hell we are!" said another. "I'm my own man, and always have been."

"Me, I've just quit," said the one who had first spoken. "I'm going out there and make my peace with the Cross C. Far as I'm concerned, I figure the Texan has earned a fair crack at you, Tate." And he marched to the door and went out.

Kimbrough's voice, as he spoke to the others, trembled a little. "Listen, I'll give any of you a hundred—two hundred to go get Allison. Five of you ought to do it. Jess—"

Jess shook his head. "I never did plan on dying for you, Tate. We fought for you, but now the big one's here, you have to do it yourself." His eyes flamed and he snarled, "Fifty a month and free drinks won't buy a man's life!"

"I'll make it five hundred for Allison," Kimbrough said desperately. "You can't all be quitters."

Some of them apeared to hesitate, but Jess said, "Tate, you don't understand. The fact is we're almost as much against you as that bunch across the street with Morley Chase." He added bluntly, "Damn few people here ever really liked you."

Kimbrough turned ashy-gray as he recognized their defiant contempt when, by common consent, they all stalked to the door. Staring after them, he did not notice Doc come in.

"Altmeyer wants to know about Swede," said Doc. "He's laying him out low."

Kimbrough jerked around angrily. "What do I care? I should worry about him now, when I've got troubles of my own?"

Doc said grimly, "Tate, it looks like you're on the skids, and acting like this will only make it harder on you. Face whatever comes like a man."

Kimbrough, still staring at the door, just muttered, "The dirty swine! The lousy yellow cowards have sold me out."

"No," said Doc, turning to the door again. "They're just taking back the part of themselves they sold to you in the first place."

IT WAS in that instant that Kimbrough, roweled by fear, caught sight of the shadows on the street from the slanting sun, and panic galvanized him. He whirled and ran for his office, where he grabbed his hat and burst out the back door into the alley.

The coach in which he had intended to drive to the railroad, with Lucy as his bride, sat there where Whisky Smith, the driver, had brought it. The horses stood with drooping heads, and Whisky was dozing on the seat. When Kimbrough came out he roused.

"How about my money, Tate? Since you aren't going to the railroad, I have to have something for my time."

Kimbrough pulled up, glowering. "Who said I wasn't going?"

Whisky shrugged. "Most folks think the only ride you're going to take is to the edge of town in a box."

Kimbrought cursed him. "If you want your money, wait here till I get back. I told you I was going to use this coach, and I am."

He headed up the alley, walking rapidly, fighting to control his near-hysteria. But a stubborn anger was in him, too, turning him vicious and ready to strike back at anyone else who turned against him now. He did not want to face Allison, but wanted less to let the man beat him.

At the Summerton home, the banker admitted him, showing no pleasure. Summerton said, "Ballinger tells me that both Swede and Little Spanish are out of the running, and that Morley Chase has taken a hand."

"And he's right," Kimbrough said harshly. "But that doesn't mean it's all over."

Summerton shook his head. "Tate, your whole scheme is falling apart, and it's going to drag us down with it."

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"The hell it is," Kimbrought snarled. "I'm going ahead and you're going to help me. I've come to get Lucy. We'll get married when we reach the railroad."

"You're crazy!"

"Am I? Is your wife here?"

"Yes, but—"

"Let's talk to her." Kimbrough pushed him toward the sitting room.

Helen Summerton looked up as they entered, her expression of surprise changing to distaste. Kimbrough bowed briefly.

He said, "Mrs. Summerton, I know how you must feel, but this will blow over and you will see that the whole thing is a mistake. I am not going to change my plans just because this crazy Texan has terrorized the town. The coach is waiting, and I propose to leave town with Lucy right away. We will get married at the railroad. If you wish you and Charles can accompany us."

She just stared at him. Then she turned her face to her husband, who seemed to be pleading with her to agree.

But she turned back to Kimbrough and said with pointed indignation, "Mr. Kimbrough, Lucy is not going with you, nor am I."

"But Helen—" Summerton began.

"It is quite impossible." She rose.

"I have only your word for this," said Kimbrought. "I am sure that Lucy—"

"Lucy is not here. I speak for her, Mr. Kimbrough."

UNDER her accusing gaze he flushed a bit, then his face hardened. He said to Summerton flatly, "I haven't much time left. Have Lucy ready to go with me in an hour, or you know what will happen."

Mrs. Summerton gave her husband a quick look. "Charles, why is this man talking to you like that?" When he didn't answer she looked at Kimbrough. "Perhaps you'd better explain."

A malicious smile slowly spread over Kimbrough's countenance. "I don't mind," he said. "He wants to be a big man—win the election to the Legislature."

"Tate—" Summerton began angrily.

"Oh, be still!" All pretense of smoothness left Kimbrough. "I've had enough rats run out on me just because things are bad right now. I'm not letting you go because I can hold onto you! Nor am I staying here to be shot, nor will I give up Lucy. I'll blow the whole thing sky-high before I'll let it come to that."

"All right." Summerton said nervously. "We can talk about it, but not right here."

"But I insist that you do so—right here, right now," said Mrs Summerton.

"Helen, please!"

"Well, why not?" Kimbrough said softly. "Maybe she can make up your mind for you."

"I warn you, Tate—"

"No, I warn *you!* What do you think would happen if it became known that you and Ballinger helped me pull a fast one on Morley Chase? What would the voters do if they knew you used to be in for half on my gambling, and on the girls we brought in? Would you like for me to tell people what your deal was with Nell Three Treys, up in the capital?"

Summerton just stood there, grimly, staring at the floor. After a moment his wife breathed, "Charles, is this true?"

Still Summerton said nothing.

"Go on and tell her." Kimbrough said tauntingly. "Show her why she'll have to help you get Lucy on that stage before I let the cat out of the bag."

Mrs. Summerton sat down heavily on the sofa, her face shocked and drawn. Then Summerton raised his head and looked at Kimbrough.

"I curse the day I met you, Tate Kimbrough. The devil's in you. You ought to die, and I hope that Texan does kill you like you've killed me."

"You're refusing?" Kimbrough demanded threateningly.

"I'd die myself before I told Lucy to marry you, now."

Slowly, Kimbrough nodded. "All right," he said unsteadily. "You've ruined yourself and your family from one end of this Territory to the other." He strode from the room and they heard the outer door slam.

Outside, the shadows had grown more

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slanting, had deepened.

Summerton wanted to speak, and could not. There was absolutely nothing to say, nothing but a belated regret that would only sound unreal if he tried to express it to his wife now.

Mrs. Summerton only murmured, after awhile, "How glad I am that Lucy was *not* at home. Though I do wonder where she is. . . ."

AT THAT moment Lucy was standing in the middle of Dr. Storrow's office floor, facing the man from Texas whose desire was to kill Tate Kimbrough, her father's Nemesis, though she had no idea of that last.

Bart Allison, his first surprise at seeing her past, said harshly, "What're you doing here?"

She met his gaze steadily, seeing a wiry man in shabby, trail-worn clothing, a man with a tanned face and gray eyes that held something wild and made her think of a trapped animal. She had seen the deadly encounter in the street, and was wondering where the tenderness, the softness that could make him love his wife the way he had, had fled.

"I could ask you the same thing," she parried, her lips growing firm.

He brushed unconcernedly past her to the window and peered guardedly down into the street. When he seemed satisfied he asked her brusquely, "There another way out of here?"

"I don't know. This is not my home."

The coolness of her tone made him look at her closer. He leaned the Greener against the wall, took out his tobacco, rolled a cigarette, and lit it. Over the flame he looked at her.

"You haven't said you're sorry about what you did this morning," she said, still coolly. "That was pretty high-handed."

"Look," he said. "I'm only sorry if you wanted to marry that coyote, now that I see what a nice girl you are. But I don't believe you loved him. Who are you trying to fool?"

His arrogance, his hardness angered her. He had taken the wind out of her sails.

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself," she said. "Who gave you the right to take vengeance into your own hands? You're not the one to say what justice is."

He looked at her, quick and keen. He said, "I am if it comes down to me."

"And I suppose that we are all expected to believe those lies you told about Tate?"

"They weren't lies."

As though she were no more than a gadfly bothering him, he took out his revolver, plucked some shells from his belt, and shoved them into the chambers, not paying her any attention. His utter absorbtion about this made her oddly resentful.

She walked a little closer to him and perched on the edge of the table, one foot on the floor, the other leg dangling. She wanted to get inside that blunt armor of this odd man, so hard and knifelike and vital, to make him notice her, and she didn't know how. She had never seen another man like him before.

"Suppose what you said were true," she said after a moment. "You wouldn't change anything by killing Tate, would you?"

"We'll see," he said shortly. He stubbed out his cigarette and went to look out the window again, ignoring her.

She watched him with an ever-deepening interest. Why couldn't she move him?

"You must have loved her a lot," she said presently, softly. "To spend three years hunting the man—who harmed her. Did you do that, like they say?"

He didn't turn around. He didn't say anything. She merely saw his shoulder shift a little. Then at last he swung around, and what she saw in his hard face made her shudder a little.

FOR a long moment Allison stared at Lucy Summerton with something like exasperation in his gaze. Then he said shortly, "Well, what do you think about what they say?"

"I think you did." Then she added thoughtfully, "A man would have to love a woman—a whole lot—to do what you've been doing."

The expression in his eyes, she thought, had been somewhat cynical. He was look-

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ing at her then all right, a regard that went over her from head to toe, seeing the full swell of her breasts, the smooth curve of her hips, the long line of her thigh as she sat a little sideward on the table. She was conscious of every item he ticked off mentally and, oddly, she was guiltily conscious. For she thought he was noticing her as a woman, and it made her warm and dangerously happy.

She could feel the beat of her heart in her throat. Then he was staring at her soft red lips. She felt herself coloring, but brazened it out, her gaze seeming to dare him.

"What do you know about love?" he asked, lightly mocking. "What do you know about men—for sure?"

She waited just a moment, then said, "Nothing," softly. "Does that mean I can't have my own opinions of them?"

"Then don't start jumping at conclusions."

"I didn't. I just said you must have loved your wife a lot."

He made a gesture. He said, dismissing this subject, "I wish you'd get out of here. They'll be after me before long, and it won't be safe for you."

The way he said it made her feel like a child to whom he didn't want to talk of important things. She moved off the table and took two short steps toward him.

"It's a wonder you should bother about me! You didn't seem to this morning. If you hadn't come here, I'd be married by now, with a future ahead of me—a husband, a home, and children in time, like other folks. That's all gone now, just because you think some woman who left you for another man was a little plaster saint!"

He started to say something, his face hard. Then he shrugged it off, as if she or what she thought were no concern of his.

"You don't mind wrecking other people's lives, so long as you get your own selfish way, do you?" she said accusingly.

Then he took a step toward her, quick and lithe, and with a throat-closing menace about him. But she did not move, meeting his gaze steadily.

He said, "You push a man pretty far."

He saw her dark eyes grow sultry and wondering. His exasperation left him, as he grew conscious of her as a woman. It was like being in a world alone with her here, closed in intimately, warm and secret. He was aware of the quick lifting of her full, round breasts, saw her meet the veiled question in his eyes boldly, and answer it. He thought, she's only a child. Why doesn't she leave a man alone?

And then he was holding her tight, her arms were over his shoulders and his lips were on hers hungrily and finding hunger there. He held her closer and felt her thigh press against his leg, and his throat was swelling, his head was singing with everything that she was.

It was a long time that they held together there, then out of his reeling senses came the knowledge that he had taken advantage of her youth and inexperience, and he pulled away. But she clung to him and he could hear the soft rasp of her ragged breathing.

He saw her eyes open, frank and guileless, but with some powerful curiosity, some deep, wild question in them that both moved and angered him.

He said, "I'm sorry I did that. I shouldn't have."

"I'm not," she said huskily. "If I hadn't wanted you to, you couldn't have. That—or anything else."

HER words, her voice were an invitation but one he could not accept—not from her.

He said, "Well, it was a hell of a thing—to kiss a girl whose sweetheart I'm going to kill. You'd better watch yourself. Not every man's as big a fool as I am." And he turned again toward the window.

"You *are* a fool!" Her tone brought him around. She was blushing deeply, as if he had brought her to her senses. She said hotly, "You take entirely too much for granted."

He shook his head. "No I don't. You're a good girl, but you're mighty curious, and that can get you into trouble. I have no time to go around robbing the cradle."

Her dark eyes snapped at him. "Don't

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tell me that you were thinking of that wife of your all the time you were kissing me! You forgot her for a minute—didn't you?"

She was devilishly smart, and right as rain. For a minute she had completely filled his universe. She was smart enough to see he admitted that, too, and she said, a bit proudly, "If I could do it once, I could do it again—or always. Maybe you don't want to believe there are other women in the world besides the one you lost, but—" She broke off.

For a long moment he met her open gaze, then he said gruffly, "You're a lot more woman than I thought. Stay away from me, or you'll be sorry."

Even as footsteps sounded from the back of the house, she said in a voice quick and low and husky, "You're the one who's afraid. You know I could make you forget her, and it has you worried."

Doc came in the back door and pulled up short, surprised at seeing them there. He glared at Allison, then said to Lucy, "My dear, you'd better hurry home as fast as you can. Your father is—not well."

"You mean something's happened to him?"

Doc bowed his head. "He's dead, Lucy," he said quietly. "Killed himself. I'll take you home."

There was a long silence. Then, dry-eyed, but pale and pinched, Lucy flung at Allison accusingly, "It's your fault, all yours. I hate you, and I hate that wife of yours who drove you to do this."

She ran out, and Doc paused only long enough to say, "She's more than half right, Allison."

Allison, listening to them go down the stairs, kept thinking of the girl and what she'd said about Belle, and remembering how she had made him feel like a whole man for the first time in years. She was young and soft and as full of life and curiosity as a young mare nuzzling a stallion. But there was something deeper, and now he knew he'd said the wrong thing. She had offered herself because she wanted, not just a man—but him.

Her old man would be damned little loss to her. Allison wondered if she knew her dad had tried to buy him off. Probably not.

Standing at the window, he saw that the shadows had come halfway across the street now, their purple fingers reaching out for the golden dust of the street.

Little more than an hour now.

As he made and lit a smoke, he found it hard to keep his mind off the girl. She was a lusty piece, a lot of woman. He couldn't blame Tate Kimbrough for hating to give her up.

BACK in the alley behind the Idle Hour Saloon, Kimbrough's bags were on the coach where Whisky Smith was waiting. In the office, bent over the safe, Kimbrough scooped a black cash box into the satchel beside him, threw in three large manila envelopes, and stood up.

Wondering if he'd forgotten anything, his nervous black eyes flickered about the place. Even if he was making a run for it, he didn't want to leave behind anything useful. With a quick gesture he swept the papers from the desk top into the bag, and was starting to close it, breathing fast and perspiring a little, when the door opened.

He jumped, his eyes wide with apprehension. But it was Ruby James who stood there, swaying. She'd been drinking harder since their last fight.

"Tate," she said thickly, "Tate, listen a minute."

"I've heard it all. Besides, I'm in a hurry."

His peremptory manner cut. "You ought to be! It's not far from sundown, you white-livered coward!"

He swore at her and put on his hat. As he turned away she seized his arms.

"Tate, please take me with you."

"Let go," he snarled.

"But you'll need someone. A friend. They've all turned against you, all but me. They want you to get killed. I've never changed, Tate, not even after the way you treated me." As her words tumbled out, the odor of whisky on her breath disgusted him.

"Take your hands off me. I'm in a hurry."

She shook her head. "Whatever happens, I'll stick by you, you know that. Tate, I'm

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not so bad, honest. If you'd give me a chance I'd quit drinking, make myself look good again for you. You'd like me again, the way you used to. I'm not a bad looker, Tate. And you'll need a friend now, somebody to stand by you, even if you get away."

He almost shouted. "No!"

She stared at him, unable to accept it. "Aw, Tate, have a heart," she said with a half-sob. "When you go they'll run me out of town. Since you threw me over for that—that girl—I've been takin' what I could get." A dogged shame came into her voice. "You know what that means. They'll give me a yellow ticket. It was you who made me do that—the money you were giving me wasn't enough. But I don't care. Just give me another chance! You'll never be sorry you did."

He was staring at her, his disgust undisguised, when the clock began to strike. He jumped, stiffened, then counted the slow strokes of five, his eyes widening with apprehension at every beat. Suddenly he jerked away from Ruby.

"Damn you, do you want 'em to catch me?" he snarled, making for the desk and his bag.

Ruby flung herself on him. For a brief, silent moment they struggled, then he pushed her hands off him and slapped her hand across her cheek. She sat down abruptly in the chair.

At the door he threw back at her, "You made your choice. I treated you good. Now, stay where you belong—in the gutter."

The door slammed and she heard his feet racing across the yard. A moment later the stage got under way.

Ruby sat there until self-pity overcame her. Then she wept, for a long time. And when the tears stopped, anger came.

It hadn't always been like he had said, between them. Not when she had been listening to his promises and his sweet words, thinking everything was honey and roses. There hadn't been any men for her before Tate, but there had been plenty of them since, and it was his fault. He had pushed her into the gutter, then scorned her because she was what he had made her.

OUTRAGE passing anger grew in Ruby as she thought of that. She dried her eyes and pushed to her feet.

Well, he wouldn't get away with it! He'd never go his merry way with a lot of money and his smooth ways for some other woman.

She opened the door and ran out through the bar into the street. A bunch of Tate's men were still hanging around out there, but others had joined Morley Chase's men across the street. All turned their faces toward her, curious, calculating and bold as she reached the boardwalk. In the last two years she had come to accept that look from men, and it no longer offended her, but made her hold them all in a certain contempt.

As she crossed to Chase and his men the rancher asked, "You want something, Ruby?"

She saw the amusement in the eyes of some, speculation in the eyes of others. Most of them did not want it known how well they knew her. They passed her without speaking in the daylight, but sought her after dark. And before Tate had thrown her over, they had tipped their hats to her!

She said, "Do you want Tate to stay in town and face that Texan?"

"I guess that's our intention, Ruby," said Chase.

"Then you'd better go get him. He's skipping town on the stage. He's well on the way by now."

Morley Chase's face hardened. Somebody growled, "Why, the coyote!"

Then Morley Chase swung his arm and started down the steps, calling, "All right, boys, come on!"

Ruby stood there, rooted in the dust, staring after them. She felt a little sick as the commotion of their mounting rose about her. Then they wheeled out in the street and spurred away, their voices high and excited and filled with a kind of holiday elation. But the voice of Ruby James broke in a sob that was choking and horrible.

The dust raised by their bursting run floated past Ruby on the warm wind. As it swirled down the street to herald their swift passage, at last she turned and went

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toward her room. Every last one of Tate's men, she had noticed, heartsick, had joined in the chase. The street was deserted. . . .

Relief grew in Kimbrough with every yard the stage traveled; the beating of the horses' hooves was the sound of freedom, lifting nightmare from his mind. At the edge of town, Whisky put the horses into a run. Kimbrough settled back against the upholstery, heaved a long sigh, and passed his handkerchief over his face.

His mouth was dry as dust. For awhile it had looked as if he were a goner. The way the men had all let him down stirred in him a mean, hot anger. Wait until he got to the capital! He had enough dope in his bags to bust that town back there wide open, and he'd do it! Anyone who tried to pull a fast one on Tate Kimbrough after that would think twice.

A shout from Whisky jerked him out of his thoughts.

"Hey! Riders coming back there!"

Panic shot through Kimbrough. Looking out the back of the stage, he saw the horsemen in pursuit, rolling down upon the coach in a cloud of dust.

"Whip 'em up!" he shouted frantically. "Five hundred if you outrun them, Whisky!"

The whip cracked, and Whisky let out a whoop. The coach lurched, throwing Kimbrough back against the seat. He clung there as the coach bounced and swayed down the road. But when he looked back again he saw that the pursuers had gained.

Little puffs of white spurted from the bunch of horsemen. He heard the reports and ducked down in his seat. How could it possibly be that his luck had run so completely out, just when he'd thought everything was all right again?

The coach slowed and he screamed, "Whisky, what the devil are you doing?" He was shouting wild curses as the horsemen clattered up.

Morley Chase reined over, pointed his gun in the window, and said with deep satisfaction, "Well, your run-out didn't work, Tate."

[*Turn page*]

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THEIR slyly grinning faces were like the faces of wolves, he thought, with their tongues lolling out as they rushed in for the kill.

"Morley, for Heaven's sake!" he blurted. "I'm no gun-fighter. He'll kill me!"

"Probably. If you haven't got a gun we can lend you one, Tate."

"But I'm no shot."

"You can learn," Chase said, sneering. "You've got at least a half hour before he comes after you."

The riders hooted. Then the coach was wheeling about and Kimbrough was looking ahead into the trap they had closed about him. And it was deep and cold and black.

At the edge of the town a cowhand looked in the coach window and yelped, "Hey! The liver-lilied son is *crying!*"

Kimbrough heard that. Maybe he was, but it was with rage more than anything else.

"You cowards!" he shrilled. "Running in a pack you're all brave. None of you who worked for me wanted to face the Texan—not even for money. You were my friends when things were safe. Now, when a man's down, you tramp on him. To hell with you all!"

One of Morley's riders jeered, "You have nothing to worry about if your conscience is clear. This is a friendly town—you've been bragging about that yourself."

Kimbrough cursed them all again.

In the doctor's office, Bart Allison saw the run out of town, and he saw the coach with its guard of riders coming back, but not until they reached the center of town did he recognize Kimbrough.

The red-headed rancher rode under Doc's window and shouted up, "Hey, Texas, we have your game here. Come on out. Nobody's gunning for you now except Kimbrough."

He saw the devilish pleasure in the men's faces and understood what had happened. He picked up the Greener and went downstairs to the walk, where he stood watching them all carefully.

Grinning a little, Morley Chase said, "He tried to sneak out but we brought him back. What do you want us to do with him?"

Allison said, "I thought some of you were his friends."

A man growled roughly, "Friends, hell! He had us over a barrel. He's a skunk, and we aim to see that you get your innings with him, Texas."

Allison didn't trust this bunch. Some of them had been shooting at him not so long ago. He didn't like turncoats, even when they helped his side.

"Just let him go," he said shortly. "He won't leave town now."

Someone pulled the door of the coach open. "Come out of there, Tate."

Kimbrough came slowly, a hang-dog look on his face. He paused as he hit the ground, and looked straight across at Allison with a fixed, wide stare. Allison saw the fear in his eyes. He'd thought of seeing that, maybe a thousand times, but now that it was real he wasn't happy as he'd expected to be.

The rider who'd opened the door gave Kimbrough a push between the shoulder blades. He stumbled, fell, and lay spread-eagled in the dust. They howled with laughter.

A man hooted, "Get up, pretty boy. You want to be laid out looking like that?"

KIMBROUGH lay as if stunned. But Allison saw his fingers dig into the dust like a man in agony.

"All right, you got him," he told them in a cold, unfriendly voice "Now, leave him alone!" He paused. "You might have thought of something like this when you were shooting at me and my partner."

"That's a hell of a way to show gratitude," a man began.

"I didn't say I was grateful." Bart pointed the Greener at the whole bunch. They didn't know it was not loaded. "Tate, get up out of there!"

Kimbrough pulled himself up out of the dust and brushed at his clothing. In utter silence he headed for the saloon, dragging his feet wearily.

He did not look at any one.

Morley Chase was staring at Allison. "You're a funny one," he said.

"Who asked your opinion?"

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Chase shrugged and turned his horse away. The others began to drift down the street to take up their vigil again. Allison went quickly over to the livery stable, where it had all started—still watchful, still knowing that it wasn't over yet. . . .

In the best residential section of town Doc Storrow stood in the living room of the Summerton home, looking at Helen Summerton who was staring dry-eyed out the window. Lucy was in her room.

Helen said after a moment, "I'm glad that Lucy is not badly hurt by this."

Doc was thinking that this was the first time he had been alone with this woman in all these years, really alone. It stirred all his old memories, with their regrets. She was still beautiful, still the woman he had loved long ago and lost.

When he said nothing, she turned and he met her questioning gaze. As they looked at one another the past came back between them.

"John," she began, "John, I—"

He made a gesture of negation. "No, please. It is Doctor Storrow, Mrs. Summerton."

She bit her lip, and the moments dragged before at last she asked in a low voice, "Do you know why Charles killed himself?"

"I could make a guess," he said slowly. "What he was was no secret to many people."

"Do you believe *I* knew about it?"

He looked down at the floor as he said somberly, "I have tried all along to believe that you did not."

There was silence again. Then presently she said, "It has not been easy, all these years." A note in her voice made him look at her quickly, and he saw the plea for understanding in her face.

He shook his head. "No, Helen. It has been hard for me, too. Tipping my hat to you on the street, watching Lucy grow up, seeing this house lighted at night and knowing that here my wife and child were living with another man. I know—only too well." He sighed, and turned away. "But the pattern is a little too old to break now."

[*Turn page*]

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"John, what of Lucy?"

He halted, and slowly he turned.

"She will have to know," said Helen. "Tate Kimbrough threatened to tell everything about Charles—all his horrible involments, everything. What of her, when she hears the truth?"

"She must be made to believe that they were lies," he said firmly. "She has the right to believe that her father killed himself rather than force her into an unhappy marriage because of blackmail. That will be something for her to keep."

She sat still and thoughtful until at last she said, her voice choked, "Then it is too late for you and me?"

It was the hardest question that he had ever in his life had to answer, and for a little while he was tempted almost beyond his judgment. He could not look at her, could not face her eyes, because he knew that he would see what he had wanted to see for longer than he could remember.

"Yes," he said at last with a certain harshness. "Let her remember her father as a hero. That's much better than suddenly finding out that her real father is a whisky-drinking medico who made every mistake in the book and wrote some of the chapters himself."

"But, John, please—"

"I am thinking of her," he said firmly. "Let it rest, Helen."

He went out then, not looking back at her.

GUS, the bartender; Pegleg Shannon; and Mealy, the swamper, who constituted the forces loyal to Tate Kimbrough in his declining hour, were back in the shadows at the end of the bar, watching him and drinking free whisky.

Gus was polishing a glass, wondering what would happen to his job, and reflecting that Kimbrough had almost gone to pieces now. He felt sorry for the man. His pride seemed almost broken, and Gus believed a man ought to care if he was dirty and dishevelled. Particularly a man like Tate, who had always prided himself on his appearance. Now he looked like he had been dragged through the streets, and he didn't seem to mind. He was drinking a lot too.

Tate's hand trembled as he raised his glass. Gus said to him softly, "Tate, whisky won't make your hand any steadier on a gun."

Kimbrough's eyes came up, the whipped, dangerous eyes of a cornered animal. He stared at Gus, then his glance ran over this place, the center of his power, where he had ordered his men to do this and do that, and they had done his bidding. Now it was a trap, a place from which he couldn't escape.

He shuddered and reached for the bottle. Pegleg Shannon eased up beside him, on his bearded face a melancholy look of commiseration.

"Well, I see the cowards have all sneaked off. How about a drink, Tate?"

"Give him the bottle, Gus," Kimbrough said absently.

Pegleg poured his drink, took it, smacked his lips and said expansively, "Tate, they're scum. Me, I stick by my friends." He nodded emphatically and had another. "Look at 'em," he went on with disgust. "The damn War's over only three years, and already they're making up to the cussed Rebs. It's getting so a feller don't know who he likes and who he hates."

Tate's head came up, and he looked at the derelict with some interest. "Why, you're right, Peg," he said. "I never thought of it that way before."

It had been a long time since anyone had valued Pegleg's opinion. He puffed up a little and said emphatically, "What's a man living for if he hasn't got a couple of good strong ideas to rally round? To hell with this wishy-washy stuff."

"That's right," said Kimbrough, his eyes beginning to brighten a little. "Help yourself to that bottle."

This sudden abundance, this growing amity with an important man, was heady stuff for Pegleg. Especially when they agreed on what had been in Peg's mind for the last three years.

He fixed Kimbrough with a bolder eye. "Anyhow, I got one satisfaction. I got plenty of Rebs before they got me. Best damn shot with the Kansas Volunteers. Sharpshooter. Used a big ole .52 caliber Sharp's with a telescope on her. Fellers

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respected me." He tossed off another drink. "Well, anyhow it's something to remember. I got a passel of 'em before I lost my leg."

By now Kimbrough's interest had come fully alive. He asked the derelict, "Peg, can you still shoot?"

"Well, I reckon I can! Can't ride a horse so well, and that stops me from getting a job. But I sure can shoot."

Kimbrough came around the bar and grabbed the man's arm, his eyes shining. "You want to kill a Rebel? Well, that Texan down there in the street is one."

THE cripple stared at him, then shook his head doubtfully.

"This deal is a little different," he demurred. "Me being a sharpshooter, I never was much for duels, face to face. I'd just climb up in the crotch of a tree and get a bead on a feller and drop him from a mile away while he was scratching his head or taking a drink of water or something. This is out of my line, Tate."

"But what's the difference?" Kimbrough's voice rose desperately. "I could make it plenty worth your while."

Pegleg shook his head again. "Nope. I feel sorry for you, but that feller's too tough to handle. I reckon there's no place in this town you can be safe from that Texan"—he laughed—"unless it'd be the church."

Kimbrough's mind was turning over with the rapidity of desperation. "That's just what I've got for you, Peg—a sharpshooter's job," he said.

The cripple turned. "You fooling?"

"Certainly not. Listen. You said it yourself—suppose he came after me at the church, the only safe place now. And suppose when he did come, you let him have it?"

Pegleg ran his hand over his dirty beard. "In the church? I don't know about that. Not that I'm a religious man, but—"

"Outside the church, I mean. Before he can come inside to look for me. Nothing so awful about a churchyard, is there? Especially one like this, where nobody's

[*Turn page*]

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even been buried yet. Besides, you may not have to kill the fellow. All I'm looking for is a safe place to hole up till dark, then I'll be able to get out of town." He made a deprecating gesture. "You surely don't think he'd follow me into the church to do his shooting, do you?"

"Well, I don't know," said Pegleg, unconvinced. "Holy Joe's liable to shout his head off if there's any shooting within a mile of that precious church of his. I don't know."

"You leave details to me. I'll put you up a tree where you can see the door—likely Gus will help me—and when the Texan comes and heads for the door—which he probably won't—you blast him. I'll be hidden somewhere inside, but I'll be on the watch for him, too."

Pegleg slowly nodded, his eyes, watery and pouched, squinted in a conspiritorial narrowness. Gus, the bartender, was listening with interest. Then Peg shook his head again.

"No, that's a little too far to go, even for me."

Kimbrough said, "Gus, break out a bottle of that good stuff."

The barkeep went down the bar, rummaged, and came back with a bottle which he set before the cripple. Kimbrough shoved it into Pegleg's hand.

"Here, take this with you. If the Texan shows up you'll be ready for him. If he doesn't, you're still ahead.

"Well—" Pegleg began, thirstily.

"You'll get more than one bottle of whisky," Kimbrough said suddenly, pushing his advantage. "You'll get a thousand in cash, and all the good whisky you want from now on. A thousand. You can be like you were before you lost that pin, Peg. People won't look down on you then—not any more. Why, man, this is the chance you've been looking for ever since the War."

"That's so," the cripple agreed.

Mealy the swamper came edging forward. He said, "Tate, if you want to do this thing right, you could cut me in. I can use a gun—providin' I got some place to hide."

Kimbrough looked at him—another derelict, a five-dollars-a-week man who swept out every morning, who emptied the spittoons and scattered the sawdust. But right now Kimbrough saw him as a man with his finger on a trigger.

Mealy said, "I could hide in that old stable on the lot next to the church. I could wing him before he got to the steps."

"Why, of course," Kimbrough said.

"That oughta be worth as much as you're giving Peg," said Mealy hopefully.

"Sure."

"And I'd have to have a better job, later," Mealy said with a show of spunk. "Nobody looks up to a fellow doing what I'm doing."

"Don't worry, either of you. I'll take care of those who stick by me. As long as I'm here you'll both be taken care of—and I intend to stay a long time, after this is over."

It sounded like dreams come true, the way out of servility and poverty, a way to respect.

Peg said, "Count me in," and swept the bottle of good whisky into his coat pocket.

"Gus," Kimbrough said, "give me that Greener!"

AS THE three of them hurried down the back street the shadows were deepening, and they went unobserved. At the door of the old stable near the church, Tate halted.

"Right inside there where the board's off, Mealy," he said. "When you see the Texan coming, let him have it. You, Pegleg, you don't need to be *up* a tree. You just get over behind that big sign of Holy Joe's, under that oak over there, and keep your sharpshooting eyes open. I hear Joe inside now, and I'm going in and talk to him. Pretty soon he'll leave and that'll be the signal for you to get set on the trigger, for next thing you know that Texan'll come loping up here hell for leather." He drew a sharp breath and chuckled sardonically, "Three cracks at him! And those fools figured I was a gone goose!"

The two derelicts went to their stations. Kimbrough went up on the porch, where

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the church door stood open. Holy Joe always kept it open as an invititation to sinners to come in and pray.

Just before Kimbrough went inside he looked down at the town. The lower tip of the sun had touched the westward hills. Shadows lay clear across the broad furrow of the street, and soon the Texan would be out there looking for him.

Just in time, he thought. But an inch is as good as a mile.

They had counted Tate Kimbrough out of the game too soon, had left him high and dry, except for two old bums he *could* buy —one with whisky, and the other with the promise of getting his hands out of spittoons.

Kimbrough laughed. So help him, he'd put those two bums over every man jack who had let him down. He'd make Peg mayor, and set Mealy up where they'd have to kowtow to him. He'd have Lucy, too. He'd have his revenge, and it would be the sweetest ever man tasted.

He went in through the open door. Holy Joe was kneeling beside the altar, head bowed. Kimbrough heard the low, earnest rumble of the preacher's voice. The old fool had himself completely hypnotized!

Kimbrough walked noiselessly down the aisle and called softly, "Joe."

Joe turned his shaggy head and saw Tate.

"Come to the Lord," he intoned. "Repent, and confess your sins at the altar. All ye who are weary of sinning—and I reckon that's you, Tate—say your say."

"Joe, help me!" Just the right degree of fear and of contrition was in Kimbrough's voice.

Holy Joe studied him a bit suspiciously. He rumbled, " 'When their pride is humbled and their palaces are dust, they cry Thy name, Jehovah!' Tate, what are you doing here?"

Tate quickly moved forward, hat in hand, eyes lowered. "They've cut me loose, Joe —every one of them left me. Turned me over to that killer."

"Figured they would," said Holy Joe

[*Turn page*]

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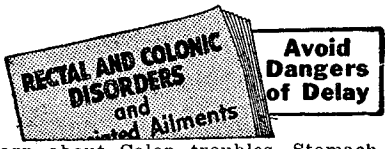

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matter-of-factly. "That Texan's a ring-tailed hooter. Got a killer's eyes."

"Joe, when a man repents, isn't this the place to come?"

Joe eyed him skeptically. "Why, I reckon so."

"Then let me stay here," Kimbrough pleaded. "He'd never think of coming here."

"You mean hole up in the House of the Lord? Tarnation, no!"

"Then where can a man turn?"

"Tate, I been praying my head off to be heard up There, and what happened? Three galoots killed! Besides, I reckon if what that feller said was true, you got it coming, Tate. You're a skunk, and you can't call on the Lord to side you."

THAT brought real fright to Kimbrough. "But, Joe, you're a man of God. I need your help."

"Tate, you never crossed the sill here when the going with you was easy, and you scoffed at helping with the Lord's work. 'And it shall come to pass that they will cry out, and there will be none to hear them.' Savvy, Tate?"

"But all that's changed. I'll do anything now, Joe. So help me! Get a Bible, and I'll swear on it. You can save me, Joe. You can *talk* to the Texan! Tell him he's got it all wrong."

"You saying they were lies he told this morning?"

"Yes."

After a moment of searching scrutiny, Holy Joe commanded, "Get down on your knees." Kimbrough dropped down beside the preacher. "Now, you mangy coyote, tell me the truth," said Joe. "You're standing on the very edge of eternity, with the devil breathing down your collar, so you'd better say it straight!"

Kimbrough muttered, "I knew she was married, but she was just an easy woman, who'd been away from her husband too long. I wasn't the first. There were lots like that during the War, Joe, you know that. All right, he loved her, and maybe she wasn't like that when he married her. But when I came along, she was already gone, so far he'd never have got her back. Joe, you know how those things are."

"The Book says—"

"I know, I know! But the thing is that I'm no worse than the others were. Why hasn't he hunted them too?"

"'Thou shalt not kill—'"

Kimbrough sighed heavily and went on, "When I left the place where I'd met her, she begged me to take her along with me. She told me that he'd died in prison and she was free to go. She never asked me to marry her, even. Just wanted me to get her out of that town where she was sick of folks knowing what she'd got to be."

"That the truth?" Holy Joe asked.

"I swear it! And after we'd traveled around together for awhile she left me—took up with another man. That Texan thinks I abandoned her when she was sick, down and out, but I didn't! She left me for a whisky drummer in Denver. After that I never heard of her again—not until today, when this damned Texan comes in looking for me, to kill me."

Kimbrough fell silent then until, when Holy Joe said nothing, Tate said bitterly, "I didn't break up his home. It was split seven ways to Sunday by the time I met her." And, pleadingly, "All I want is for you to tell the Texan that—and let me stay here while you talk to him. He wouldn't start anything in the church, Joe."

Holy Joe remained unconvinced. "I'm not so sure of that, Tate. Things nowadays aren't like they were in the olden times when killers, debauchers, all come running to the House of God for what they called sanctuary. I read that. Besides, no matter how you look at it, those other fellers sinning with her didn't lessen your sin a whit. That's the Word."

Time was running out. Kimbrough hadn't expected this opposition from Holy Joe. In final desperation he whipped out his wallet and opened it.

"Joe, take this. Call it my donation. Get a new organ, some red carpeting, whatever you need most for your church."

For some time Holy Joe stared at the sheaf of bills in Kimbrough's hands.

At last, with a hurried gesture, he took

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them and said, "In the name of the Lord, Amen."

He lurched to his feet, and Kimbrough almost pushed him down the aisle. Relief that made him feel weak was in him as the preacher went out and crossed the porch. He'd thought the old fool would never clear out before the Texan got wind of where he was and came too soon.

Alone in the church at last, suddenly the whole sanctified atmosphere of the place seemed to choke him. He felt stifled. He had to get out of here!

He almost ran to the door. Pegleg moved from behind the big sign.

"Get back to that tree, Peg," he said.

He watched the cripple obey, lean the cocked carbine against the tree, and reach for the bottle in his pocket. Then Kimbrough looked over at the stable.

The last tip of the sun was sinking over the western hills. His heart tripped up a faster beat. He waited tensely.

(To be concluded in the next issue)

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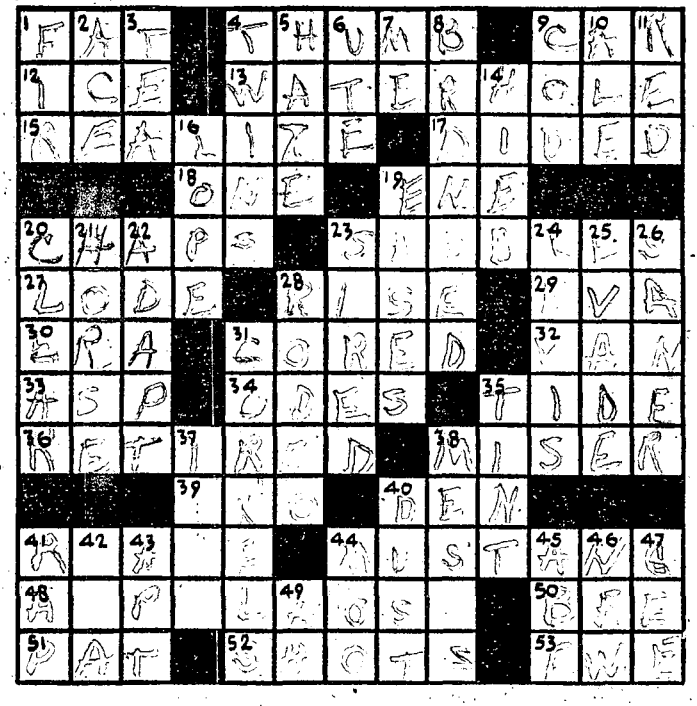
THE WESTERNERS' CROSSWORD PUZZLE



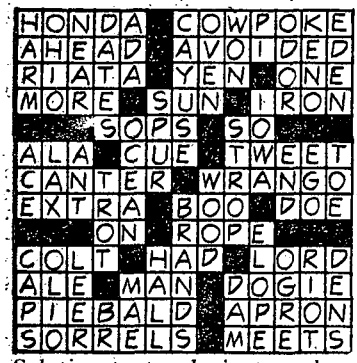
The solution of this puzzle will appear in the next issue

ACROSS

1 Plump
4 Short and thick finger
9 Automobile
12 Hard water
13 Cowboys' refreshment place
15 To apprehend clearly
17 Helped
18 Individual
19 East-northeast (abbr.)
20 Cowboy garment
23 Cowboys' seats
27 Mineral deposit
28 To get up
29 Girl's name
30 Period in history
31 Removed the core from
32 Moving truck
33 Poisonous snake
34 Lyric poems
35 Ocean movement
36 Goes to bed
38 Tightwad
39 Gold (Sp.)
40 Room for studying
41 Lariat
44 Half-wild horse
48 Spotted horse
50 Honey maker
51 Lump of butter
52 Gun sounds
53 Female sheep

DOWN

1 Evergreen tree
2 High card
3 Beverage
4 Two born at once
5 Mist
6 Indian of Utah
7 Myself
8 Marked with iron, as cattle
9 Food fish
10 Malt drink
11 Scarlet
14 Hastened
16 Easy gallop
19 Comforts
20 Not cloudy
21 Cowboy's animal
22 To adjust
23 Fathers
24 Blue denim trousers
25 To dodge
26 More sensible
28 Wild West show
31 Cattle enclosures
35 Light color
37 Jot
38 Flat-topped hills
40 Fine powder
41 To knock
42 Including particular average (abbr.)
43 Likely
44 Cow's sound
45 Lincoln's nickname
46 Modern
47 Command to horses
49 Cry of surprise



Solution to puzzle in preceding issue

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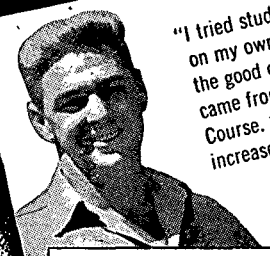
not at all, scientists say



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